

A
Lady's
TANTALISING
Portrait

DAPHNE PIERCE

A Lady's Tantalising Portrait

A REGENCY ROMANCE NOVEL

DAPHNE PIERCE

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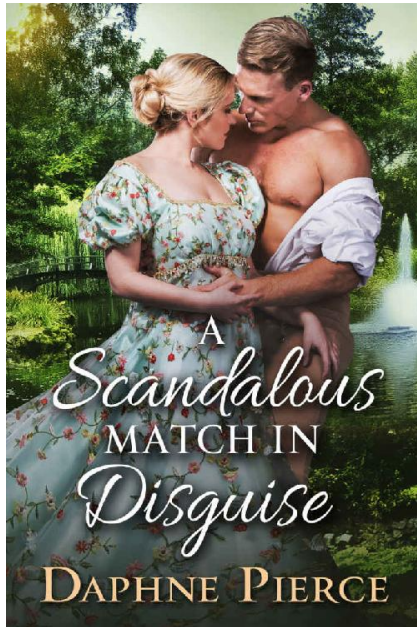
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A Lady's Tantalising Portrait

Introduction

The charming Lady Rachel Hampton grew up in a very powerful but conservative family, having everything but her precious freedom. As her parents excluded her from London's sinful high society, she was left alone, dreaming of a love that could release her from her golden cage. Yet, when the time to find a match arrives, an arranged marriage will destroy her hopes for true happiness. Little did she know that after the commission of her portrait, the most passionate and wicked man was about to appear in her life and change her world forever. Rachel's meeting with the attractive artist will tantalise her innocent mind and stimulate her most inappropriate thoughts. When his flaming touch sets her heart on fire, will Rachel finally fight for her scandalous romance against her parents' will?

William Smith, a very desirable and talented artist in London, is an enticing, wild at heart, and fiery young man. After Rachel's parents hire him to paint her portrait, he quickly realises she is the most tempting woman he has ever laid eyes on, and completely different from all the pretentious ladies of the ton. Nevertheless, things turn dangerously complicated when he finds himself unable to resist her pure beauty and the fierce desire that burns between them. Knowing that he is diving into a perilous situation with her, will he manage to control his untamed passion?

Rachel and William's guilty game of seduction starts from the very first painting session and leads them into a secret lustful affair. They may come from different classes, but the hot flame of attraction between them triggers their love that grows stronger every day. However, when their hot romance is exposed by Rachel's parents, it seems that their affection will face a most cruel society that utterly demands their separation. Will Rachel and William choose to risk it all for the sake of their forbidden temptation or will their connection be overshadowed by their merciless misfortune?

Chapter 1

Mayfair, London

1819

“Must we, Mother?” Rachel barely held back the annoyance and upset in her voice. “Is a painting of me *that* essential?”

Her mother, Mary Hampton, the Duchess of Hurstmere, stood to her side as Rachel’s maid, Jane Colton, finished with coifing Rachel’s hair. Tall and solemn, her mother’s dark-clad figure made her look more like a nun than a Duchess of England.

“Yes, my daughter, it is,” Lady Mary said.

Always my daughter, never my name, dear, or darling. Would it mortally harm you, Mother, to be a bit affectionate?

But that was how it was the Hampton House; it was as empty of affection as the ton was with compassion. She could not remember the last time her mother and father were affectionate to the other. As she had grown, she was sure that they had never been affectionate with each other.

The most emotion Rachel had seen with her parents was when they were in church, and then, that emotion was only religious reverence.

Jane slid the last pin into her hair, and she stood away for Rachel to see. Her thick black hair was pinned away from her face but cascaded around her shoulders in waves. The simple hairdo bared her alabaster skin and making her vivid blue eyes stand out like beacons.

She stood, feeling the entire length of her demure dark blue dress brush the tips of her shoes. Her arms were encased in full-sleeves, and her bodice, high and fastened up to her neck, made her slender form look like she was covered with a bed sheet twisted into a shapeless mockery of a dress.

The few times she had attended the ton's affairs, Rachel's cheeks had never stopped burning bright with humiliation. Against the new fashionable and elegant silk and satin gowns the other ladies wore, she looked like an odd stack of rose-colored velvet monstrosity with enough cloth to dress three.

The one time she had timidly mentioned it to her mother, Lady Mary had sniffed at it, *"Silk, my daughter is the cloth of Cyprians and seductresses. You will not touch such a sinful cloth as long as I am alive."*

Rachel had learned not to ask for or ever yearn for finery or luxurious items. And she could accept that, but as the years had passed, she had grown with the deep-set fear that she would wake up one day and feel empty, passionless, and stoical as her parents.

What about her husband? The very one her parents were set on having her wed to by the end of the year? Would he be as apathetic as her parents? Could she live with such a man and snuff out the passion she had fought so hard to hide and hold onto inside her.

A soft knock came on the door, and while her mother turned, Rachel still peered in the mirror.

“The painter is here, Your Grace,” a maid said anxiously from the doorway. “Mr. William Smith is in the foyer waiting for you.”

“Thank you,” Lady Mary nodded curtly. “Now, come along, my daughter. You have your sitting now.”

Meekly, Rachel followed her mother from the room through the bare corridors and down the sweeping staircase. She kept a few steps behind her mother to mutter her discontentment about this whole sitting. The feeling that her parents were selfish in making a portrait that would stand in her place rested heavily on her heart.

Halfway down the staircase, Rachel caught sight of the man there—and nearly lost her step.

Mr. Smith was tall but not gangly, broad-shouldered, lean of hip, messy curly brown hair flying pell-mell around his face. His clothing was clean but worn...and odd clothes. A bright blue neck cloth stuck out from his baggy grey shirt with an odd patch of green cloth over his heart tucked into similarly loose maroon buff trousers.

As she neared, she saw the clean structure of his broad cheekbones and square jaw, and his bright green orbs glowed from his oval eyes. His eyes latched on her face and never moved.

“Ah, Mister Smith,” her mother greeted.

He gave an ostentatious bow, one Rachel believed would have been more fitted to the Prince Regent than her parents. “I am honored to be summoned by you, Your Grace. How may this humble artist serve you?”

Lady Mary looked pleased. “I have summoned you to paint my daughter’s portrait. I have been told that you are the best in London, what with having painted the Duchess Scarbrough’s daughter and the nephew of the French Dauphin?”

“Yes, Your Grace,” he nodded.

“Good,” Lady Mary said. “I want something even better than that one. Rachel, come and greet Mr. Smith.”

A flash of irritation and resentment ran through Rachel’s heart; she felt as if her mother were treating her as a pawn in a game of one-upmanship. Obediently, though, she came to her mother’s side and stood there.

Mr. Smith’s gaze ran from the top of her head to the tips of her dress’ hem, and for the first time under such a look, Rachel shivered. Before she could say a word, he bowed to her, “Lady Hampton, I am incredibly pleased to meet you. ‘Tis true; your beauty should be immortalized on canvas. If only my modest talent can do your lovely image justice.”

Oddly, Rachel did not feel that he was currying favor with her. His

words did not carry the sly undertone trickery or brownnosing; it could be that he was as eccentric as his clothes. She blushed. "I am delighted to meet you, as well, Mr. Smith."

Nodding, he looked back at her mother, "Where should I set up, Your Grace?"

"Where do you think best?" her mother asked.

He looked thoughtful, and again, his eyes skimmed over Rachel's face. "Do you have a solarium, Your Grace? The lighting there should be lovely."

"Yes, we do," Lady Mary nodded. "Miss Colton, would you please come with us. I want you to sit in while I am away attending to a matter with the church. His Grace should be back from his morning prayers and will drop in as well."

"Mother? You are not going to be with us?" Rachel asked, surprised.

"No," Lady Mary shook her head. "I do not want to impede Mr. Smith's artistic process as I am made to understand artists can be rather particular with how they work."

A wash of strange relief went through Rachel, and she only nodded. It was probably for the best as she did not think that having her mother and her criticizing gaze and words would help.

Jane curtsied to her mother and led Rachel and Mr. Smith up the sweeping staircase and down the corridors to the west wing where the public rooms were. The solarium was expensive, and the tall bow and mullioned windows gave enormous amounts of light into the room.

With a look over her shoulder, Rachel realized that Mr. Smith was carrying a wooden easel under his arm and slung over his other arm was the strap of a leather satchel. She looked around, wondering what more they would do there.

“Miss Colton, was it?” Mr. Smith asked, and at Jane’s nod, he continued. “Would you open those drapes to the east window wide and make sure that the space is good enough for me to move this chair there.”

When Jane went off, Rachel took a moment to admire Mr. Smith; his sculpted face, firm jaw, arching cheekbones, thin blade of a nose, and thick brow did not fit the person he was. She could easily see him in a dark ball suit, and meticulously tied cravat with a gaggle of debutantes reaching for him to marry them.

She watched as Jane fixed the curtains, and when they were set to Mr. Smith’s liking, she watched as he single-handedly lifted a wingback and set it at an angle to the window.

“My Lady?” Mr. Smith gestured to her. “Please.”

“Oh, yes, yes,” Rachel stuttered, hoping that the man had not caught on to her staring. Moving to the chair, Rachel sat and fixed her body in a way she thought appropriate for a portrait, face front and with little emotion.

But Mr. Smith shook his head, “No, no, that is not fitting. Turn to your side a little.”

She shifted, but it was not enough, and with more encouragement, she found herself sitting at an angle where she was slanted. Rachel felt the sunlight on half of her face, and the other half was shadowed.

“Would you tilt your face up?” he asked, and she did. “To the left a little.”

She tried to follow his instructions, but after three more ineffective tries, Mr. Smith came to her, notched a knee on the arm of the chair, and asked, “May I touch you?”

Wide-eyed, Rachel’s eyes shot to her maid, who looked as lost as she was. Looking back at Mr. Smith, Rachel nodded her permission. No man, except her father, had ever touched her, and Rachel felt the air in her chest hitch.

His fingertips were rough with calluses, and his skin was warm as he gently shifted her face to the left, where the light was coming from. He pulled away to consider, then lifted her head a little more, then used his thumb to shift her head just a smidgen more.

“There,” he sighed in satisfaction. “That is the best angle. Do you think that you can stay there for a good while?”

“I will do my best,” she said.

He pulled away, but the remnants of his touch still lingered on and under her skin. It took her all her efforts not to shiver at the still impression of his thumb on her chin. Not to mention the feelings that erupted in her chest at the intent look in his vivid eyes. Rachel had a strange feeling that he was seeing more of her than what she saw of herself.

From the corner of her eye, she saw him set up the easel and lay a hard slate on it before putting the paper. He flicked out his satchel, which unfolded again to reveal a section that had pencils slotted through little hoops. He slid one out and then pinned her with an all-encompassing gaze that he held for a long and somewhat nerve-wracking minute.

When he dropped his gaze, only then did Rachel suck in a breath. The burning her lungs startled her a little, and from there, she made sure to take in measured breaths, but not deep enough for her to disturb the pose Mr. Smith wanted her to take.

The frequent tingle of her skin and the sporadic prickle of gooseflesh across her skin told her the times Mr. Smith's astute eyes landed on her. Keeping her eyes away from him, Rachel wracked her mind; what was it about the man that piqued her attention and strange reaction to him? He made her quiver inside.

She thought back to the few balls she had attended, how the gentlemen would skip their eyes over and find the other more fashionable ladies, as if only they were worthy of their attention. Rachel had felt utterly undesirable and has suffered hours sitting on the sidelines with other wallflowers.

Now, to have the attention of a man secured on her felt strange and exciting. Even if it was only for a portrait, she felt *seen*, remarkable, and not as invisible as she once thought she was.

Truly, Rachel, he is only a painter; his attention is supposed to be on you. Do not romanticize it, no matter how handsome he is.

Rachel held the pose for as long as she could until strain began to sit into her shoulder. She could feel Mr. Smith's eyes flick over her while his fingers flew over the paper. Under all her fascination with Mr. Smith, Rachel still felt miffed with her mother and this whole proceeding.

The grandfather clock's hollow sound sounded in the air, and Rachel realized that it was the third time she had heard the chime. Had three hours passed by so quickly?

"I think—" Mr. Smith said as he laid down his pencils, "—that is all for now."

"Are you sure?" Rachel asked. "I am sure we can go another—"

But then, her father strode into the room, his tall, burly figure clad in muted grey tones suddenly possessed the air in the room. He looked at her with tight censure in his dark green eyes, and Rachel knew that she was going to be scolded for contradicting a man. Dread settled stonily in her stomach.

Chapter 2

She's still tense...why?

While moving the graphite over the paper, William kept his eyes flickering up and over the gentle lady sitting too stiffly for her to look normal. So, he took it upon himself to curve her stiff shoulder, smooth out the knit in her brow and remove the tautness from her neck.

Her face needed no retouching as she was enchanting, like a princess torn away from the pages of a fairy-tale. Her lovely oval face had softly rounded cheeks that framed rosy and full lips. The eyes that once met his were wide and rimmed with thick sable lashes making her emerald gaze so vivid.

William took pleasure in drawing in the delicate contours of her face, her pert nose, piquant little chin with a quaint divot at its center. Her dark locks fell in a controlled stream to her waist; he could not deny the need to see what it would like tangled and wind tossed. Even more, what would it feel like when the strands passed through his fingers?

She is a lady; I am only a commoner; nothing can happen, but I can dream.

Under her forced façade, Lady Hampton still looked very annoyed, and he wondered why. It was too soon for him to start digging into why she was miffed. But one day, as soon as the shock of their sessions wore off and he got to know her more, he would be able to tweak some answers out of her.

As time ticked away, he could see her getting more rigid, and when the echo of the grandfather's chime came, he decided it was time to call off.

I think—" William said as he laid down his pencils, "—that is all for now."

"Are you sure?" Rachel asked, snapping her head to him, and making her curtain of hair flutter. "I am sure we can go another—"

But then someone came in, and Lady Hampton paled. He pivoted a little to see an older man.

"Pardon her, Mister Smith," George Hampton, the Duke of Hurstmere, reprimanded Lady Hampton, "She knows that it is not her place to contradict you. Isn't that so, daughter?"

"Yes, Father," she said quietly. "I apologize. It was not my place."

But you meant every word—I can tell.

Turning, William bowed to the Duke, "Good afternoon, Your Grace. I am William Smith."

Nodding tersely, the man came to look at the sketch on the papers, and his brows inched up. William watched as the Duke's gaze

flickered from the paper to his daughter, who was still seated. The sketch was not finished; some lines were bold and bright while some were faint and wispy, but what William was proud of was how he had captured her eyes.

“It is going to be one of many, Your Grace,” he explained. “The first drawing is hardly the one that will prove fortunate enough to be immortalized in oil.”

“Really?”

“Yes,” William said. “We will try a few more settings, in the library or garden perhaps, and find the right angles and backdrops to make the entire work stunning.”

“I know nothing about such procedure, so I will leave you to master your trade,” Duke Hurstmere said. “And Rachel, no more contradicting Mr. Smith, you hear me?”

“Yes, Father,” she said meekly. “I do.”

“Are we finished here, Mr. Smith?” he asked.

Shooting a look over to the young lady, William replied, “For the time being, yes.”

“Good,” the Duke said. “Rachel, come with me.”

A flash of despondency ran over her face, but she masked it quickly. “Yes, Father, and again, Mr. Smith, I do apologize.”

He bowed, “No harm was taken, My Lady. Have a good evening.”

While the lady, her maid, and her father left the room, William packed up the pencils. He shot a look to the drawing and back to the pencils before packing up the papers in the leather folio that would keep it flat. Before he met the Duchess and her daughter, a maid had shown him to a modest room in the guest’s quarters, so he knew where to retire.

At least they did not stick me with the servants’ halls. I have had enough of that.

He got his things together, closed the easel up and tucked it under his arm, and left to the secondary set of stairs that led to the same quarters that the main staircase led up to.

The room was quaint, and the bedroom was spacious. He took a moment to appreciate the crisp linens dressing the four-poster bed and the water waiting for him on the washstand. Crossing to the window, he glanced out, expecting to find a view of the English countryside, and smiled at the sight of the vibrant gated garden.

The dying sunlight hit him as he gazed out beyond the garden to see the winding, twisting hedge maze, centered by a flowing marble fountain. Instantly, his hand started to twitch with the urge to reach for his pencils and paper to catch the moment. The sunlight dazzled over the marble, and the water spewing from the fish’s mouth broke

the light in a mesmerizing phantasmagoria of colors. The sight begged to be drawn.

But he lifted his left hand and used his right to massage it. William knew the dangers of overdoing it with his hand. He cringed a little at the memory of how stiff his hand had been some years before when he had used it from sunrise to sundown.

He turned away to appreciate the washstand, and the stack of clean towels sat beside it. Leaving the window open, he went to disrobe from his day clothes and donned another set after a quick wash. The housekeeper had assured him that he would be getting the same meals with his board, but it would be best for him to dine in the kitchen.

Dressed in loose trousers and a long linen shirt, an acquisition from his travels in Scotland, he left for the kitchens and greeted the cook. After a quiet exchange of words, the thick beef stew and flaky brown bread were sat before him, and William began to eat.

Having dined in many manor houses, William was used to eating good meals, but just like the rest, felt the same loneliness that came wrapping itself around him. It was an old feeling that had settled itself inside him from the day he had left home to chase his dream of being an artiste.

Finishing his meal, William handed the utensils to a maid and drifted back to his room. Working with the aristocracy had been a double-edged sword; he had met a lot of lovely ladies, but none of them had paid him any mind. He had lingered on the edge of their world, only able to look in.

But now, why do I feel as if things will be different.

He perched at the window again and gazed out at the countryside and the rolling hills beyond the boundaries of the manor lands. He wished England were like Scotland; back in the lowlands, the lawn would be teeming with fireflies, tiny dots of lightning to color the bushes and flowers.

The image of Lady Hampton's face, interspersed with the fireflies in his mind, had him reaching for his private sketchbook and his pencil. He framed her with her head looking up, her long, luxurious hair fanning out, and the pinpricks of the lightning bugs formed a halo around her head.

He drew until the gibbous moon was high in the sky, and the relaxed look that he had given the lady rested on his mind while he went to bed. Hopefully, the next day he would get a chance to find out what had made her so angry.

Dawn found William wandering through the garden, the sketchbook in the crook of his arm while he detailed a dewdrop still lingering on the Begonia's petal. He drew another line down the stem of the flower and added a little shade to the petal while patiently waiting for Lady Hampton to speak.

He had seen her enter the garden a while ago but had pretended not to see her because he wanted her to be bold. From the way her father had spoken to her the day before, he had a deep, troubling feeling that her family did not give her much room to control her life.

If she wanted to be married, she would have to learn to be a little more assertive.

“You take deep study of all your subjects, don’t you?” her voice was quiet but sweet, like honey.

He lifted his head and gave her a gentle smile, “I find that a close examination gives the best results. Good morning, My Lady.”

Her guarded eyes flickered away from him to another bush but went back to him, “You too, Mr. Smith.”

“Call me William,” he said.

She shook her head, “I’m sorry, I could not dare.”

Cocking his head, he insisted, “In public, perhaps, but I would much prefer for you to call me William.”

“It is not right,” she said. “I would not be able to reply in kind, so please, do not ask me again.”

Deciding not to push—well for now—William agreed. “May I ask, why were you upset yesterday? You were very tense in the sitting.”

“I—” Her head snapped over her shoulder, and her face paled a little.
“I am sorry, I have to go.”

Before William could say a word, she was gone, disappearing in the dissipating mist like an ephemeral spirit, leaving William to wonder why she had run off so fast.

Perhaps her parents keep her close, like a babe in leading strings. And with how they dominate her, how is she ever going to marry?

After contemplating over it for a while, Edward decided that it probably was not his concern. All he needed to do was do an excellent job with her portrait, get his payment, and leave off to another job.

But the thought from last night—that somehow this assignment would be different came back to him.

I suppose I will have to wait and see.

He did not have to wait long to see why Lady Hampton had hurried off. While rounding the garden, he came up to a small stone chapel and saw her and her parents kneeling before the altar with a quick look inside.

And they are religious; that would explain why the Duke said that she knows better not to contradict me. I suppose they have taught her to submit to every man too.

Walking away from the building, William wondered what more there was to Lady Hampton, or should he call her Rachel? She had the look of a scared rabbit—but then yesterday, her shoulders had squared in defiance.

Were there more sides to the lovely lady than what she showed to the world?

He went back to his room to dress for the day, wondering how long the three would take in the chapel. Musing about the drawing resting in the folio, he wondered if the sunroom was the right setting for Rachel. It seemed so sterile and plain. Did it fit her?

I will need to know more about the lady before deciding on that.

He arrived at the solarium before Rachel and her maid did, set up the easel, laid out his pencils, and fixed the drapes when the two walked in. Rachel had her hair in the same style as yesterday, and though her dress was a different color, it was the same high-necked puritan style.

It dawned on him that her parents did not want her in any current clothing; another piece added to the portrait of Rachel's complex life. He felt sorry for her.

A woman of her beauty should be clothed in the finest silks and trefoils.

He bowed. "Good morning, My Lady and Miss Colton."

“You too, Mr. Smith,” she curtsied.

“Shall we pick on where we left off?” he asked pointedly.

She looked confused for a moment. He knew she was wondering if he meant the portrait or the aborted conversation they had earlier. She flushed, and he knew that she had landed on the conversation, but Rachel gestured to the chair.

“Yes, please.”

She sat, and William leaned in to angle her face again; he dropped his voice so only she could hear, “Are you still upset?”

Her gaze flickered, “Yes.”

Slightly taken-aback by her forthrightness, William realized that his impression of her was all wrong. It was not only that she held all her feelings inside; she just did not have anyone to tell them to. If her parents were so controlling, he would wager that they were unwilling to listen to her deepest concerns.

“I’m sorry.” He pulled his fingers from her face. “If you want a listening ear, I would be more than happy to listen. You should not have to bear such burdens in your heart.”

She made to reply but bit her lip and turned away. Instead of taking

her hesitation as a refusal, he took it to mean that she needed more time. After all, she would be spilling her innermost secrets to a stranger.

Going back to the easel, William reached for his pencil.

I'm sorry. If you want a listening ear, I would be more than happy to listen. You should not have to bear such burdens in your heart.

It was not only Mr. Smith's kind words that had her considering his offer but his earnest look as well. She wondered why he wanted to know. Because her stiffness might make his task worse? Or was he genuinely concerned about her?

When the morning session ended, and Rachel asked Jane to get her some water, she turned to Mr. Smith. "Why do you want to know how I feel? Does it matter to you?"

He set his pencils away. "Yes, because I hate to see someone in distress."

Warily, Rachel asked, "And you are sure this is not because my expressions would make your assignment hard?"

He took her hand and pressed it to her chest. Again, his touch strummed up a shiver inside her, and she knew he felt it. "If it bothers

you, it will make your soul dark. You are too young and too pure to have a dark soul.”

Tilting her head a little, Rachel tried to find a hint of deception in his gaze, but she had little experience in spotting trickery. With a long inhale, she sank to her chair and trained her eyes out the window.

“They hardly listen to me,” she murmured, then flicked a look to Mr. Smith. “My parents, I mean. They only listen when it is something that they want for me but will dismiss me when it is something that I want for myself.”

A fleeting tick in his jaw and a dark flash over his eyes told her that he was displeased as well. Feeling a bit boldened, Rachel said, “Not to offend you, Mr. Smith, but I had not agreed to this painting. I suppose that explains why I was so stiff and tense during yesterday’s fitting.”

“I see.”

His simple answer was not one she had expected, but it had not come with any judgment or terseness.

“I feel—” she bit back the words sacred, terrified, and trapped, “—looked over. As if I were a child and not the lady they know I am.”

“Is that the only thing you fear?” Mr. Smith asked pointedly, and without knowing if it were right of her to tell him more but not wanting to lie to him, Rachel nodded.

“No, but I don’t think I shall share that with you,” Rachel said. “I do not mean to disrespect you; I just—” she faltered.

Mr. Smith took her words in good stride. “I am not insulted, My Lady. Why should anyone share their fears with a stranger? I, however, am honored that you chose to tell me what you have. And be assured, not a word of what you have told me will leave my lips...unless you ask me to.”

Stunned but comforted that he would not tell her parents, Rachel smiled. “I—”

But then, Jane came back into the room, and Rachel shifted her words. “Thank you.”

He moved his head and looked around, his expression contemplative. “I am not sure this is the best environment for you.”

She blinked. “What do you mean?”

“I think this room is too bare and bland,” he replied. “There is little coloring and not much...*Joie de verve* to do your beauty justice.”

Reddening, Rachel ducked her head. That was twice Mr. Smith had alluded to her beauty, something she had not thought of before. No one— particularly no man—had ever uttered those words. And he had done it so calmly that she wondered if he realized what he had said.

“Where do you think?” she asked.

His eyes met hers, and his gaze was level. “I do not know yet, but I suppose we will have time to find out. Let’s finish this session, shall we? The right location will find us along the way.”

He moved back to the easel while Rachel reached for the glass that Jane still held. She drank, then handed it back to her before regaining her position from before.

Can I tell him all that concerns me about this? That I feel this portrait is a cheap way of selling me off to me who would not care about me?

Looking at him, she met his eyes briefly, and his flickering smile placed her at ease. *Mayhap I can trust him.*

Chapter 3

“I think that is it,” Mr. Smith said as he placed a pencil down. “It is not finished, far from it, but it is getting closer. Would you like to see?”

Standing, Rachel moved over to the easel and gazed down on the image he had sketched into life onto the paper. With surprise, she gazed down at the portrait of herself. There were still some lines faint and wispy, and a portion of her shoulder was not drawn in, but what was left was still substantial.

For a moment, she wondered if Mr. Smith had drawn another person instead of her because this lady on the paper was utterly gorgeous. She refrained from brushing her fingers over her cheek and nose, making sure the same form rested on her face.

“It is wonderful, Mister Smith,” she murmured.

“Your face has caught my artist's eye,” he mentioned. “Like the fair Joan of Arc, you are noble and gracious, but I feel I have done you an injustice by using dark lines. You deserve bright oils, My Lady.”

Blushing at the mention of the noble warrior, Rachel felt the warm complement settle on her heart.

“You are a fair subject for my brush,” he went on. “If I have seen your beauty, others will too, and I am assured that you will make a beautiful bride and good wife.”

Rachel went rigid, the sudden motion drawing Mr. Smith's attention. He turned to her with a light smile. "Do you not think so?"

"No," she said harshly. "I certainly do not. Good evening, Mr. Smith. Jane—" She spun on her heel and stomped out of the room, incensed and disappointed that she had started to trust him, hurried to her room with her maid on her heels.

She huffed out a breath. "And just as I was about to trust him too, but he proves himself to be just like the rest. Like my parents. I am just an object for marriage. No one cares about what I want to do with my life, how I want to travel, see places as far from this place as possible. I feel—I feel—" She plunked herself to a chair. Her gaze dropped to her lap, and a feeling of misery and disappointment sank on her heart. "—trapped."

Jane took the seat beside her and reached out to hold her hand. "My Lady, if I may be so bold, but mayhap you are judging him too quickly?"

"No," Rachel said stiffly. "He, just like my parents, sees me as a wife, but none of them see me as a person under it. It...its feels as I were chattel. Tonight, at our dinner, I am going to tell Mother and Father how I feel. That this marriage makes me uncomfortable and that it scares me."

Looking unsure, Jane said, "I hope for the best."

Even the good wishes, all Rachel heard was, *and if they still force you*

to marry...what then?

Obediently, Rachel kept her head bowed and her eyes closed as her father droned on. She tried to listen to the words he was saying, but the words she planned to say to them took precedence in her mind.

She knew that it was best to keep her tone calm, meek, and pleading, but the words, laced with hurt, frustration, and even the feeling of betrayal, were not leaning into that ideal.

“...And for these bounties, we thank you, Lord, Amen,” her father closed.

Agreeing, Rachel laid her napkin on her lap while her mother asked her, “How was the session today, daughter?”

“It went well, but Mother, I do not want to do this,” Rachel pleaded. “I am not ready for marriage, and I do not think painting a portrait will help. Is it not a little tawdry?”

“Nonsense,” Archibald scoffed. “Your mother and I got married just a mere a year older than you are now. You will do fine.”

“But I do not want to marry yet,” Rachel said. “Which lord will marry an unwilling bride? What about a personal connection? What about love?”

Lady Mary eyed her sharply. "Love is superfluous to a marriage. It is God's covenant, daughter, for you to be married. You two will live a good life; even if you must live in a marriage of companionship, you will marry."

Feeling as she was losing her standing, Rachel asked, "But what if I grow to resent this man?"

"Prayer and patience will take even the notion of those emotions from you," her mother waved her concern away as if she were a buzzing gnat. "You will marry the man we pick for you, and you will be peaceful, protected, and provided for."

Now, she grew frantic, "But—"

"But nothing," her father stopped her. "The portrait will be painted, and you will marry the man we choose. That is final. Now, be quiet and eat your dinner."

Jerking as if she had been slapped, Rachel hung her head in defeat. Her appetite, little as it was, vanished, but she forced herself to eat. Holding back the aggravated tears, Rachel made it through the meal and excused herself to her rooms.

Jane, who was straightening up a few items on her dressing table, turned with a warm smile on her face—but seeing the distress on Rachel's, her expression fell.

“Would you draw me a bath?” Rachel asked before she sank to a chair.

Her maid uttered something, but Rachel was too troubled and miserable to reply. She barely plucked herself up to disrobe with Jane’s absence and don a dressing robe. When the water was ready, she sank into the copper tub and finally allowed the tears to fall.

She sat back, staring bleakly down while the droplets disappeared into the water. Her parents did not care about her feelings at all, and she felt the allegorical noose tightening around her neck.

Staying in the water until it went cold and her tears had dried out, Rachel weakly left for the rooms, donned a night rail, and slipped into bed. She tried to hold on to the fleeting hope that her life was not descending into a pit of hopelessness.

All night, William had tried to find an answer—any answer—to explain why Rachel had gotten angry and walked away from him the evening before. After a sleepless night and pacing around the room, no explanation had come.

Wearied, he leaned on the window and gazed out at the garden with tired eyes. When his gaze landed on Rachel’s slender form meandering through the bushes, his fatigue vanished. Pausing only to drag on a pair of trousers under his nightshirt and don his boots, William left the room and hurried to the garden.

Rachel's back was turned to him, and he frowned a little at the drab, shapeless wrapper she had on. He could easily see her in a more feminine, frilly white silk version, its hems lifting with the slightest ebb of the wind.

His boot snapped a twig, and she spun on her feet, eyes wide with fright before she saw that it was him.

"Mr. Smith," she pressed a hand to her heart. "You scared me?"

"I apologize," he said gently. Then cocked his head at the pale redness in her eyes. "You were crying."

She spun, "It is no concern of yours."

"If I said or did something intolerable by you, then yes, it is my concern," William replied kindly while daring to rest a hand on her shoulder and turn her back to him. "Please tell me if it is something I did. I will find a way to make it up to you."

She turned to him with her lips trapped between her teeth. When she released it, his eyes followed it, sparking off a smoldering desire in his belly.

What would your lips taste like? Sweet honeysuckle or tart lemon zest like my favorite sweet?

Just as he had expected her to turn away, she notched her chin up a little.

“If I have seen your beauty, others will too, and I am assured that you will make a beautiful bride and good wife,” Rachel stiffly quoted his words back to him. “Seems to me that just like my parents, you are ready to see me sold off to some man that I do not know and who does not know me.”

Struck by her admission, William searched for words to tell her. Still, as he searched, his eyes landed on something more visceral. He plucked three sprigs of marigold from the bush in three long strides and went back to her.

Dropping to a knee, he offered them to her. “My deepest apologies, I was not aware, My Lady.”

Rachel’s lips parted, and her hand trembled by her side. Soon she reached out for the flowers. “You did not have to do that.”

“No,” William said as he slowly rose from the ground. “No, I had to do it. I never meant it that way. No one in their right mind would think of you as a bartering tool.”

She looked mollified. “I suppose my parents have lost theirs.”

Hoping that she was more open to speaking with him, William gestured to a wooden bench. “Will you sit with me a while?”

A tall flowering sapling partially covered the seat, and he took care to keep some space between them. Noting the many times her eyes dipped to the flowers in her hands, William asked, "Do you know the language of flowers?"

She twirled the stems in her fingers. "I was not aware there was."

"Flowers mirror the soul," William said. "And each one speaks loudly. A poet once spoke, *For the flowers have their angels even the words of God's Creation. For the warp and woof of flowers are worked by perpetual moving spirits. For flowers are good both for the living and the dead.*"

"That—" she paused, "—sounds beautiful."

"It is," William watched her face. "And there is more? Would you like to hear more of it?"

A warm pink colored her cheeks, "Yes, please, I would."

"For there is a language of flowers, for there is a sound reasoning upon all flowers. For elegant phrases are nothing but flowers. For flowers are peculiarly the poetry of Christ. William quoted the poem he had read so long ago. "For flowers are medicinal. For flowers are musical in ocular harmony. For the right names of flowers are yet in heaven. God make gard'ners better nomenclators."

Her eyelids were lowered, and for once, William saw how long and thick her lashes were. If she lowered her eyes just a little, they would be fanning out on her cheeks.

“That is beautiful,” she murmured. “It’s a poem, you say?”

“Yes,” William replied. “It is rather long, though.”

She peaked at him from under her lashes. “If it is so long, how did you remember all of that?”

William found a chance to repay her secret with one of his. “I have never told this to anyone, but I have the gift to recall all that I read. Anything that my eyes skim over is imprinted on the shelves of my mind.”

Again, her lips tipped open, and once more, William was tempted to lean in and kiss her. “That is...that explains why you see so many little details!”

“Yes,” William replied, “Is it the secret to my success.”

Now, she faced him directly. “Why do you not want anyone else to know?”

Gazing up over her shoulder, William admitted, “Because it haunts me at times. When I delve deeply into a study, my thoughts never quieten. Thankfully, it has not happened to me here, and I hope it never will.”

“Oh,” she said. “I cannot think how hard that must be for you. But did you tell me that to even the score of secret sharing?”

“Yes,” William nodded. “It is only fair.”

Twirling the flowers, Rachel made to say something but stopped at the last moment. She looked over her shoulder to the house behind them. “I think I should go.”

He laid a hand on her arm. “Before you go, would you please do me the honor of using my name? I would love for you to call me William or Will if you would prefer.”

Her eyes shifted. “I... I will consider it.”

Though the temptation to move his hand and cup her chin, William dropped it to his lap. “Thank you.”

As she moved away, Rachel stopped then pivoted. “You said that there was a meaning to every flower; what is the meaning to this one?”

Taking the ripe opportunity, William said, “I will tell you...if you meet me here for three days at sunset.”

For the first time, a spark of mischief lit upon her eyes. “And what if I find it first?”

He stood. "I would still want you to come. I know more sorrows are resting on your heart. 'Tis not right for you to bear them alone."

She pressed the flowers to her heart. "I—I should go."

Bowing, William watched her go, hoping that she would take his offer to heart. And perhaps she would trust him enough to tell her all the worries that rested there.

And that is not all I am hoping for...but will she feel the same?

Chapter 4

Training her gaze out the carriage window while she came from church, Rachel thought about the kind offer Mr. Smith—William? — had extended to her the evening before. She wondered if it were right of her to take it up.

“Daughter?” her mother asked. “Why are you looking so pensive?”

“I am just musing over Father Morgan’s message, Mother,” Rachel hated to lie, but she knew that it was one of the few things that would dissuade her mother from prodding more.

“As you should.” Her mother sat back with a pleased look on her face.

Giving her a faint smile, Rachel went back to thinking about Mr. Smith, how he had admitted his struggle with his mind. She never expected something like that to come from him, but then she could see how creative men like him would have an internal struggle.

The carriage trundled into the manor’s driveway just as her mother said. “Rest for a while, and then come down for your sitting with Mr. Smith.”

“Yes, Mother,” Rachel said.

She had decided to keep her conversation short with her parents. It

felt nonsensical to keep long discussions with them as they would dismiss all she said. They were set in their ways, and she found herself starting to search for a way out from it. A footman opened the door and helped her mother out before taking her hand.

They entered the bland foyer, and while a maid called her mother's attention away, she climbed the stairs and headed to her rooms. When she entered, the first thing her eyes landed on the vase holding the three wilting sprigs of Marigold in it. There was a meaning behind it, but while she did not know what they meant, she treasured them.

Jane came into the room. "Good afternoon, My Lady. May I help you?"

"Yes, please."

Soon, Rachel was out of her stiff church clothes and in a dressing robe while waiting for the bathwater to be heated. She reached out for one of the flowers, "Jane, have you ever heard about a language of flowers?"

Her maid looked up, "Yes, I have; why?"

"Mr. Smith mentioned it to me, but I still don't understand much about it," Rachel said. "And I cannot find any resources to get a clearer hold on it."

Jane sat near her, "I can tell you the meaning of this flower if you would like."

“Would you?” Rachel asked excitedly. “Please. What does Marigold mean?”

“Sorrow,” Jane said simply. “He must have sensed sadness or distress coming from you?”

Fingering the wilting flower, Rachel sighed. “Considering how my parents denied listening to me and my plea not to get married so soon, I would suspect that the emotion was written all over my face. But why would he care?”

“Will you let me tell you what I have observed?” Jane asked, and at Rachel’s nod, she added, “I think he fancies you, My Lady.”

She warmed inside at the allusion that the handsome man liked her, “He would be a first.”

“Does that mean...?”

Fixing her skirt, Rachel sighed. “Nothing could come from it. I admire the man. He is handsome and extraordinarily talented, and he makes me warm inside when he looks at me. Still, he is only here to do a job. And I am slated to marry soon, and I doubt a fleeing fancy with the painter will keep on when I am married.”

“But...” she shook her head. “I want romance and excitement, and, I don’t know, a handsome suitor climbing the moonlit ivy-trellis to see me. Now, all I have—all I will have, is probably a man as sedate as my

parents. I am trying so hard to keep the little vivacity I have, one that no one expected me to hold with the family I live in.”

Her tone dropped into despair, and Jane heard it.

“Mr. Smith said that he is willing to listen to my concerns, but I do not know if it is right or proper for me to tell him,” Rachel rubbed her face. “I do not want to paint a horrid picture of my parents.”

“I would think that Mr. Smith would have enough discretion to keep your concerns to himself,” Jane said. “He might be unconventional, but I do not think he would betray you.”

While her gaze landed on the window, Rachel asked, “Are you saying that I should take him up on his offer?”

“I do.”

Perhaps Jane had a point. “I suppose I’ll speak to him this evening. But I would like to rest a little before my session with Mr. Smith.”

While she moved to the bed, Rachel tried to put together what she would say to William that evening—but slipped to sleep before she had gotten a hold of it.

The sun was inching down to the horizon, painting the sky in broad swathes of red-gold and vivid oranges. Soon, indigo would be creeping into the fusion, and twilight would set in. William was already seated on a bench, a pad of paper resting on his lap, his hand flying over it.

He looked so intense while drawing, with his gaze flickering up to the sky frantically. It was as if he missed a moment of it; his effort would be rendered void. He looked passionate, so intent and concentrated that Rachel held back on approaching him. She did not want to break his focus.

When he dropped the pen to put the paper aside and massage his wrist, only then did Rachel go to him. A few feet away, he turned to her with a broad smile but did not say anything until she sat on the bench aside from him.

“I’m happy you came,” he said.

Offering him a faint smile, Rachel asked, “May I see what you were drawing?”

He offered her the paper, and Rachel gazed down at an image far removed from the scene she saw before her. The hills were in the background, and so were the clouds, but a flock of rainbirds was spreading out, topping trees, but she found a formation that she believed were Hebrew.

“Mr. Smith—” she paused, then dared. “William, are these Hebrew letters?”

“Yes,” he said. “It’s ewe, Hebrew for Rachel.”

Stunned that he knew Hebrew, Rachel shook her head, “Why rainbirds?”

“Because I think you feel the need to fly,” William said, hitting Rachel right in the emotion that she had been trying to hide from him.

“You are right,” she said. “In many ways, I do wish that I had the wings of a bird to fly away.” While handing the drawing back to him, Rachel asked, “Do you know the purpose of the portrait you are creating for me?”

“Not particularly,” he shrugged. “Why?”

“My parents think it is a good way to entice men into courting me,” Rachel said bitterly. “Men that I do not know will be using an image of me to see if they want to be with me or not. And the worst part is that they do not care what I want. They will match me with a man who is as single-minded, boring, and dull as they are.

I want fun, happiness, and pleasure in my life, something—” Rachel stood and paced a little, “—romance, true romance. Is that too hard to ask? After the bland life I am living, how bad would that be?”

“A life half-lived is no life at all,” William murmured.

A small thrill at being validated raced through Rachel, and she felt empowered to tell him more. “They think that I will accept a marriage of convenience for the sake of marriage. But I want a bigger life, a more daring life, have adventures, see places, meet people, do more, become someone I want to be proud of when I look in the mirror.”

The fleeting energy left her, and she sank back on the bench. “But no, they only want what they want...I have no part in making decisions on my life.”

A gentle hand turned her to him, and both gazes met and held. “You do have a choice. No one can force you to agree at the pulpit.”

She laughed softly. “I wish that were true. My life seems so bleak. I have heard of girls marrying for love—but I know my parents do not believe such things exist. They do not even love each other but stay because propriety demands it.” She wrinkled her nose. “That scares me.”

“You want to marry for love and passion,” William mentioned. “And I honor that...but passion is a scary thing. It can burn itself into disaster.”

His meaning was not lost on her. “You know what passion is?”

“Yes.”

A shiver of acute awareness spread over her body, lifted ripples of gooseflesh over her arms, and made a strange tightening in her lower belly. This close to him, all of her senses were flooded because of him;

the bright burn in his eyes, the callused feel of his fingers, his spicy scent of soap and paint penetrated her nostrils.

She felt the air go more relaxed around them. She swallowed as his hands moved from her shoulder up against her neck, the calloused pads rasping lightly against her skin. “What do you know about carnal desire?” he asked. “That brilliant burn in your chest that makes all others dull and lifeless?”

“Nothing,” Rachel said breathily, her gaze flickering between his eyes.

Twilight began to draw in deeply when both of his hands cupped her head and held her in place. She shivered a little while being it that strong yet strangely gentle grasp another mind grew blurry.

A single thought flashed in her head, *is he going to kiss me?*

The tantalizing heart of his hands and body drew her mind away from the present into dreamland, as hazy and mystical as the fog that clothed the gardens some mornings. She began to float, adrift in realization—that against all rationality, she wanted him to kiss her.

She did not know him, and he knew little about her, but she wanted his kiss to be her first.

Unwittingly, her lips parted, and William’s eyes dipped to her lips. Still, instead of meeting hers with his, he went back to studying her eyes. His thumbs coasted over her cheekbones before he pulled away.

“Be careful about what you wish for,” he said mysteriously.

Her legs felt weak, but she stood. “I have to go.”

“Have you found out what the Marigold flower means?” he asked.

“Yes,” Rachel said, wanting—needing—to get away. “I have. It means sorrow.”

“Good.” He then handed her four stems of another flower. “Then you will find out what these mean as well.”

This time he did grasp her hand and brushed his lips across her knuckles. “Good evening, Rachel.”

And without a word, she hurried back to the manor house. Tingles and shivers still ran over her skin and down her spine at the memory of how William had looked at her.

Panting, she reached the safe confines of her room, feeling decidedly out of sorts. But what was more troubling—she felt the tips of her breasts were stiff just as her skin was tingling.

Dazed wonder ran through her, powerful enough that it sent her sinking to a chair. So, this feeling, is what they mean by desire. In the few gothic romance books she had managed to sneak away and read, Rachel had grown to understand in theory but now actually knew

what it meant.

It was this heady, magnetic, pulsating, riveting force between her and William that had sprung up out of nowhere, only to take control of her body. She pressed her free hand to her heart that was thumping out of rhythm and sucked in a few deep breaths.

Thank goodness her parents were back at church again because if they had summoned her for a talk, they would take one look at her state and ask her what was wrong. Rachel knew that she could have never lied convincingly enough to them in the state she was in.

After a few long moments, she had steadied her body and managed to examine the new flowers William had given her. The flowers were white but had faint tints of pink to them, and the unopened buds mainly were pink with streaks of white.

She lifted to her nose and the smell—was familiar, but she could not place it.

She twirled the stems a little. “What do you mean?”

A soft knock heralded Jane’s entrance, and her friend came to sit beside her. “More flowers?”

The room was dim so Rachel handed the tiny bouquet to Jane. “Do you know what these are?”

Taking the flowers to examine them, Jane's brows darted up just as her mouth slipped open. "Oh my..."

"So, you do know what it means," Rachel asked. "Please tell me."

Hesitantly, Jane asked, "Are you sure that you want to know? If I tell you, it might change everything..."

In his quarters, William dropped the stubble of a pencil and looked at the chaos he had just created. Rachel stared at him from a dozen sheets of paper, her head in different angles, the look in her eyes going from innocent and pure to wicked and wanton.

He knew she had not looked at him that way in the garden, but by peering into her eyes, he had gotten the glimpse that she could be. It was not suitable for him to fantasize and dream about the innocent lady, not when she was ten years younger than him and an ingénue to worldly pleasures.

And she is going to be married off soon—do not forget that.

He should not be feeling this level of attraction to Rachel. Still, he knew she had driven the desire deeper inside him because of how she had passionately stated her desire for adventure and romance.

When he had held her face in his hands, he had not mistaken the

flicker of heat and attraction in her eyes. The way her bosom had risen and fallen when he had closed in on her had solidified the notion.

Though she might not have recognized the signs of attraction her body was giving her he did. If he had not held onto his control, he would have taken her pillowy lips with his, and God only knew where they would have ended.

While desire thrummed through his body, and though he desired Rachel, he knew that he could not offer her anything she could ever want. She was the daughter of a Duke—he was a poor artist. But knowing that had little effect on his emotion—he wanted her.

Sagging into his seat, William rubbed his forehead with his free hand. It felt so tempting, so titillating to know that he would be her first kiss, her first erotic touch. He did not dare to think of the other first he could give her, but that was a dangerous road of thought.

But the image prodded at him in bed. What would she look like, freed from all the notions drummed into her that letting your desires out was a bad thing? How would her eyes look, glimmering and bright with raw desire?

Would she blush red when he stripped away the layers of her horrid, unflattering dresses? He supposed he would only have to wait and see.

Chapter 5

He fancies me. William likes me... he likes me as a woman.

The apple blossoms' blooms were wilting, and while Rachel knew what they meant, she was not sure what to do about it. How could she go on to sit for him, knowing that he appreciated her, otherwise from being his subject?

She had never had the attention of a man before and it both titillated and scared her. Rachel did not have the first inkling of what to do if—or when—he verbally uttered those words.

“My Lady,” Jane said quietly. “It is time for your sitting with Mr. Smith.”

Unready to meet him, but with no excuse not to go and sit with him, Rachel stood, but before she went to the solarium, she tucked the spring of the apple-blossom into the button hole of her dress.

Upon stepping in the room, she found that William was there already, his hair pell-mell and wild, flopping into his eyes and curling around the collars of his wide-necked shirt. His sleeves were billowy and were buttoned at his wrist, while a strange red cloth was wrapped around his waist, its fringed ends dipped to the floor.

“Lady Hampton,” he bowed at the waist. “Good morning. I hope you have rested well?”

“I have,” Rachel replied. “And you?”

“A sleepless night of utter creative chaos that I do not regret in a moment,” William said happily. “But even without rest, I am fully capable of finishing your first portrait.”

Taking her seat against the window, Rachel tried to get herself back in the position she had taken before. Still, even with William’s direction, she found that she could not.

With a smile, he came to her, his fingers light but firm when he turned her face to the right angle. His eyes dipped to the sprig of apple blossom in her lapel, and his smile took on a sultry edge.

“I take it you know what this means as well,” he whispered.

The warmth of his breath skittered over her skin, making gooseflesh erupt over her cheek, turning her face rosy. The feeling only got worse when Will brushed his fingers across her arched cheekbones.

She kept the position while Will went back to his easel and took up his pencils. She tried to slow her beating heart with long, slow breaths, but she failed. With his eyes stuck on her all through the three hours, the heightened attention to him only grew.

The slightest glance made her heart pound through her ribs, and she felt that her face was permanently red through it all. When William told her that he was done for the day, Rachel did not move away as

she usually would.

“May I see the drawing?”

His grin was wide, “Sure.”

Moving from her seat, Rachel went to his side and saw the drawing, done in kohls. The drawing was magnificent, with her full bust outlined, her head tilted up, and the fall of her hair around her shoulders looked as if she could reach into the paper and caress her hair.

“It's...” she fought for a fitting word, “...lovely. It so lovely, William.”

“Yes,” he nodded. “But I still do not think it is fitting. I want to see another version of you in the library and in the garden. This room is a bit too austere and dry to match you.”

“And you do not think I am as austere as this room?” Rachel asked. “I do not know anything else?”

He was wiping the coal dust off his hands. “I think that you have passion and inner fire that only needs to be discovered and let loose.”

Rachel felt as if she were stepping over a wide boundary when she asked, “And how do you think I can find that fire?”

“I—”

“Daughter?” her mother called as she swept into the room. “I see that your session has ended.”

Instantly, the warmth that had settled itself inside her heart grew stone cold. Thankfully, there was a decent three feet of space between her and William, and she saw how her mother swiftly judged it as well.

“Yes, Mother,” Rachel said. “We were just seeing how far Mr. Smith has come. I think it’s a bit plain though, Mother, and that another location might be best for him to capture all the elements you would like for the true portrait.”

Her mother’s sharp eyes flicked between her, Mr. Smith, and then landed on the drawing between them. Rachel stood away when her mother came closer to the easel and skimmed over it.

“I think it’s...” Lady Mary stopped, “...it is lovely, but it does need something more, so I agree. You shall have more time.”

“Mr. Smith wants to try the library next,” Rachel said in relief. “I think it best to start on the morrow. I am a bit tired.”

“Too tired to start to plan your debut ball with me?” her mother asked.

Reigning in her irritation, Rachel calmly said, "I think you can handle that alone, Mother. I do not need to be there. Besides, I know nothing about how to arrange a ball."

"Fine," Lady Mary waved her. "Rest if you must but know that one day you are going to have to throw balls of your own. I am going to have a sit down with you and the housekeeper one day to start your training."

Still irritated but masking it, Rachel managed a faint smile, said her goodbyes to her mother and William before hurrying to her rooms. Only there was she safe to let her smile drop and her irritation show.

"Ugh, if only she would do away with this ball entirely," Rachel huffed to the empty room. "She knows how distressing this is for me but is still doing it anyway."

She did not need to rest, but Lady Mary had a way of walking into her room to check if Rachel was doing what she had told her that she would be doing. So, with a heavy heart, she climbed into bed and turned away from the doorway.

A quarter of an hour must have passed before Rachel sensed another person in the room. It was either her mother or Jane, but with her feigning sleep, she did not dare turn to look.

But she realized that it was the two of them when Jane quietly asked, "Shall I wake her, Your Grace?"

“No, no,” her mother said. “Leave her be. Her father and I will be off to an afternoon service as well, so she will not see me until probably tomorrow.”

Another wave of relief washed through Rachel, but she did not move; not until the two left the room did she begin to breathe easily. She allowed herself to drift off and woke again in the afternoon.

While sitting up, she wondered if William was back in the garden and drawing more imaginary birds on the dusky twilight. Slipping out of bed, she donned her shoes and moved from one corridor to another, then finally out of the house.

As she had hoped, she spotted the wild tuft of William’s head peeking over an evergreen bush; only this time, his focus was a tree. His eyes flicked up to her, then back to the tree. She sat beside him and managed to spot what he was drawing.

The tree had its roots and trunk, but its top was that of a woman—a naked woman. Scandalized, Rachel said, “Good heavens, William. That is...*immoral*.”

He laughed, a soft, husky sound that sparked more heat inside her chest. “I beg to differ. There is nothing immoral about celebrating a woman’s body?”

“But—” she paused in mystification. “Why would you merge a tree and a woman?”

His brow cocked. “Have you never heard of the Nymph?”

“A what?” she asked.

“Nymphs, My Lady,” he said. “Alseids, Dryads, Meliads, Naiads, and Oreads. In olden times these spirits were the guardians of nature. They were all women, beautiful, nurturing, and invaluable to the ancient world. They were known as the lovers of gods and the mothers of heroes.”

“...When you say ancient,” Rachel asked hesitantly. “What do you mean?”

“Ancient Greece,” William clarified. “The birth of democracy but a time of mystery and wonder. The old gods reined with iron fists and gentle touches. They mated with humans and birthed heroes that formed dynasties and left wonder and magic in their wake; Hercules, Achilles, Perseus.”

With hesitation, Rachel reached out for the paper and stared at the image. The lady's nipped-in waist curved from the stump of the tree, her arms lifted high, drawing one's eyes to her rounded, plump breasts. The crests were barely covered by strategically drawn in locks of hair that fluttered over her shoulders and around her back. It was erotic, sensual, and something she knew she should not be looking at.

“William, do you think it is wrong for me not to want to marry soon?” She asked.

“No,” he said. “You should not have to bow to another's wishes.”

“But they are my parents,” Rachel said, frustration lacing her tone. “I cannot disobey them, but they have little regard for my wants. I have tried to tell them that I am not ready, but they only brush my concerns to the side. I want romance, but at the same time, a lord who would please my parents.”

“And if you do not find one?” William asked.

“I don’t know,” Rachel said, then flicked an assessing look to him. “My parents do not love each other, William. But I want to love the person I am with. How hard would it be to have a lord read me poetry while I am on my terrace?”

Before she could utter another word, William grasped her hand. When she turned to him, he slid his other hand to her cheek. In the dark, his eyes were piercing flames of green.

“Rather a romance of the ages, elopement at moonlight and ladder and rose-rimmed trellis. Crowned by father’s curses, mother’s moans, and scathing whispers of neighbors, then succumb to correctness and propriety hemmed mercilessly in by morals and measured by yardsticks.”

Speechless, Rachel could only stare. When she gained her breath, her words still sounded breathless. “...Poetry.”

He smiled. “Poetry. Rachel, I share your sympathies; I too want to find a woman I would love enough that if she asked me for a blood ransom, I would offer my arms. But—” he pulled away, but his gaze never left hers, “—in all my years of searching, I have not found the

right one.”

Freed from his trapping gaze, Rachel asked, “How long have you searched?”

Twilight had crept up on them, but the darkness of the garden did not scare her. “Seven years,” he said. “From the day I turned twenty, I felt a sort of emptiness inside. When I was a child, my parents passed away, but I was fortunate enough to have our landowner take me on at his estate.

William began to gaze out into nothing while his tone took a wistful lilt, “He sent me to the village school and helped me. I had pledged to serve him until he died, but he told me to make my way in the world. He sent me to London, and from there, I sold my first painting, and then, I found members of the peerage calling for me to do work for them, mostly portraits and such—” he broke off with a laugh.

She nudged him, “What is making you laugh?”

“A widow in Manchester hired me to paint portraits of her heirs. I had gone to her estate ready to meet these heirs—men I had assumed—only to find out that she was leaving her money to her *dogs*. An English bull terrier whose features were akin to a pugilist who broke his nose too many times and a Neapolitan Mastiff that had more wrinkles than a prune. Its wrinkly face and drooping face made *me* sad.”

Snickering, Rachel asked, “Did she truly leave her wealth to her dogs?”

“I cannot say,” William shrugged. “I would not be surprised if her staff let the dogs into the wild and took the money for themselves. She did pay me handsomely, though.”

Rachel laughed before she stood, “I have to go back inside, William. Good night.”

As she moved away, he caught her hand and slid his fingers from her arm down to her wrist. Even with the cloth between them, Rachel could still feel the heat of his hands, and when he held her palm, she did all she could not to shiver.

“Rachel...remember you deserve the romance that you want,” he said softly—almost tenderly. “Do not settle for less.”

When she slid her hand out of his grasp, the warmth of his touch lingered with her as she left for her rooms. Her parents were not home yet and probably would not be until late in the night, so she was safe to go to her rooms without a rush.

Jane was there, tending to the fireplace; she had already closed the windows and pulled the drapes, but Rachel went on anyway and opened it. Perhaps William had not left the garden yet, and as she looked down, her eyes landed on his dimmed figure. He was resting back on his hands and staring up at the rising moon.

“He is ten years older than I am,” Rachel mentioned. “And he just spoke poetry to me.”

“Poetry?” Jane asked. “Is he a romantic?”

“Yes,” Rachel said while pulling away from the window. “And alone. He is an orphan, Jane, and from what I gather, a drifter wandering the land. Only staying when he finds a job.”

What troubled her was the sinking feeling that had settled into her stomach from saying those words. If it were true and William only stayed around for the jobs he was tasked with doing, why did she feel so troubled at him moving away? He was nothing to her—but even thinking about that did not feel right.

He is the first man to call me beautiful, and I know it was not only because of the painting.

She stared out into the darkened garden for a long, marked silence before Jane broke it. “My Lady, I may be a bit presumptuous, but...do you like Mr. Smith?”

“Yes,” Rachel said plainly. “I do...as a friend and more. I am fascinated by him.”

“My Lady—”

“I know, Jane,” Rachel said tightly. “It is very risky and perilous of me to fancy a painter, but my parents have already chosen to control my life. What will it hurt for to me throw caution to the wind and dream for a moment? It probably will not go anywhere, but until they tighten the noose around my neck, I am going to pretend that it does not exist.”

“He is handsome,” Jane mentioned. “But I would have never expected him to be that much older.”

“Neither would I,” Rachel said while moving away from the window and facing Jane. “Would you prepare a bath for me and have supper sent up soon after?”

“Yes, My Lady,” Jane curtsied and left the room.

Alone, Rachel mused on the words William had said, mere inches away from her eyes. As if he were talking to her soul.

“Rather a romance of the ages, elopement at moonlight and ladder and rose-rimmed trellis...” Rachel whispered. “What is he trying to tell me?”

Chapter 6

The glow of the sunset gave William the perfect background for the rosebushes he was twisting into another Nymph, only this time, the immortal spirit had Rachel's face. The day had gone well with another sketch started with her in the library, this time, she lay on a divan with a book on her lap and her legs covered with a blanket.

Her image had not left his mind, which was why he found himself drawing her into another mystical figure. He was shading in a rose that formed half of Rachel's stunning face when he heard her approach.

Rachel had a very tender gait, and she treaded light, almost silently on the ground. Still, he heard the tiny crunch of dry leaves under her delicate foot. He closed the folio and turned to her, "Good evening, Rachel."

She smiled. "How are you?"

"Would you like to take a stroll with me?" he asked.

"Sure," she nodded. "And the reason why?"

"Your garden is spectacular," he mentioned. "The flowers you have here call on me. I want to teach you a few meanings of some of them."

He stopped at the Primrose bush and reached out a finger to stroke the petals. "Primrose means consistency, stability, assurance."

"I had a friend named Primrose once," Rachel said as she too touched the flower. "But she moved away when I was ten. We sent letters for a while until her father divorced her mother, and Mother told me that I should not speak with her anymore. That her father did that Devil's work, and Primrose was going to follow him."

"Your mother said that an innocent child was going to be what? A heathen?" William said carefully.

"In as many words, yes," Rachel said with a soft shrug. "I never understood that at the time, but now I feel it was a cruel thing to do."

"It was," William said as he moved to another flower. "Pansies mean thoughtfulness, but there are underlying meanings as well. Because of the many colors, they too come with different meanings. Red and violet mean passion, yellow means happiness, blue equals calmness and trustworthiness, and pink denotes innocence."

He plucked up a flower from the bush. "The white color means *let's take a chance*. But even that is more complicated. If one were to offer you a bouquet of white pansies—" he pointed the section. "—edged in violet, the person could secretly be saying, let's take a chance on my passionate feeling towards you because I trust you with my feelings."

"So, it conveys romantic feelings," Rachel noted.

"Yes," William said as he reached over to rest a hand on the small of

her back. He felt her startle, but when he pretended not to notice, she relaxed a bit more.

“Myrtle is a flower that is steeped in mysticism,” he said while reaching out to the delicate blossom. “According to ancient mythology, the Goddess Aphrodite was born there. The saying goes that her Roman counterpart Venus visited the Isle of Cytherea but was ashamed to show herself because she was naked and hid her nakedness behind the myrtle tree. It was thought to inspire lasting love and marriage.”

Rachel huffed. “I’ll stay away from that flower then.”

He turned. “You don’t have to fear marriage, Rachel; the only thing you do have to fear is marrying the wrong person.”

“Considering the men my parents would deem fitting, I am sure that whomever they do choose is going to be the worst person for my life,” Rachel noted.

“I would not give up yet,” William said as they moved to a rosebush. “Have you ever seen an orange rose?”

She shook her head, “I was not aware there was such a thing.”

“An orange rose means that you are besotted with someone. The yellow rose shows warm feelings of friendship, joy, wisdom, and power. White rose symbolizes innocence and purity.” William said while moving to the far side of the bush to snap off a flower. “The dark pink rose shows love and gratitude while the lighter shade shows

gentleness and admiration, but the red rose is the greatest symbol to express romantic love and passionate affection.”

He offered her the rose, “Sometimes it means simplicity, like yourself. Simply beautiful.”

She took the rose, but her cheeks bloomed brighter than the flower’s hue. “You truly think I am beautiful?”

“It’s a crime that no one has told you the same,” William said, brushing his knuckles across her cheek. “I wish there were a pigment, a hue, and a mixture of what colors we have to paint the blush on your cheeks.”

She ducked her head, but the hue on her skin only burned brighter. “Erm...thank you.”

Knowing that he was making her uncomfortable, William stepped away. “There are more flowers and many more reasoning, but it is late, and we do not have time to get to them all. Aren’t your parents at home? How can you be out so late?”

“My parents are back at church—again,” Rachel said tonelessly. “They will be back long after I am gone to bed.”

He brushed her hair away from her face, “Know this; you are worth real love, not a pale version of it or to marry for the sake of marriage. Marry for love, nothing less.”

Rachel grew a bit misty-eyed, “That poem you said to me...was it something you wrote?”

“In a whim of fancy, yes,” William said. “I too dream of love, but to find it, there is the rub.”

She reached out and touched his shoulder, “You’ll find it; I know you will.”

He took her hand, placed it on his cheek, and laid a long lingering kiss on her palm, “I hope so. Good night, Rachel.”

Dropping her hands, he stepped away and watched her leave to the closest doorway. She paused at the doorway to look over her shoulder before vanishing inside. William went back to the bench and sat. The darkness did not bother him—god knew that he had spent more than a few times surrounded by it.

What did concern him was the hollowness in Rachel’s voice when the topic of marriage came around. What sort of man were the Duke and Duchess looking at for their daughter? If what Rachel said was right, it was a man who would suck the vivacity that she was trying so hard to keep alive out of her.

She deserves so much more. True love does not have to live only in novels...

William stayed in the garden, watching the moon's slow ascent until its mesmerizing glow began to lull him to sleep. He left to his rooms

and there before sinking to bed, as he wondered why he was allowing himself to walk down a road that would end up nowhere.

He knew Rachel must have realized his attraction to her, but they both knew it would not end up well—so why was he still trying?

“Lord, what fools do these mortals be...” he sighed.

Warm sunlight streamed through the thin, unadorned curtains while Rachel finished breakfast with her mother. A long narration of what the priest had said the night before had almost put her to sleep, and now that she was ready to leave, her mother wiped her mouth.

“We have a few things to discuss about the ball,” Lady Mary said.

Rachel held back a groan. “I do not think you need me for help, Mother. What is there for me to discuss with you?”

“Mind your tone,” her mother nearly snapped. “This is not something for you to dismiss. Three lords are going to be in attendance, and they are men your father and I think are best for you.”

Rachel burned to ask her how they were best for her—or if truthfully, they were best for her parents. But she swallowed over the bitter words and sat quietly.

“These lords are respectful, modest, and have a good hold on their territories holdings and finance,” her mother said.

Ah, there it is—money. Why do you need more, Mother? You and Father have a dukedom with more riches than you can spend in a lifetime. Or is the greed of sin not applicable to you?

“These lords are being chased after by women in the ton, but they have not married. It is your task to give these men a good impression of you and get them to call again without being prodded to do so.”

“These men have been in the ton, Mother,” Rachel said evenly. “They have seen women in the best clothes and who wear cosmetics. They will not take a second look at me in the clothes that I wear.”

“Your clothes are fine,” Lady Mary objected. “What you need to do is to learn your place, be subservient, and agree to what they say.”

Again, Rachel had to swallow over the words brimming on the tip of her tongue. She would not act like a feather brain with any of these men, no matter how hard her parents were going to push her to be.

Her mother told her about the lords—names that she promptly forgot because her irritation eclipsed everything inside and around her. She might not know much about balls, but the little she had seen told her that lords looked right over drear, unfashionable women.

I would be surprised if these men come at all, and if they did come, it is

because my parents are wealthy.

She sat through her mother's rant and heard little of it by the end.

"Do you understand?" her mother said.

"Yes," she lied.

"Good," Lady Mary said.

As Rachel hurried out of the room, her mother's words stopped her. "And your father has seen you with Mr. Smith, daughter. It is the oldest story in society and for scandal. A society lady with a liking for a servant—he will be gone soon and out of your life. We will find your husband for you at the ball."

A chill raced down her spine at her mother's words, and though Rachel wanted to deny them, she knew they were true.

"Mr. Smith is a friend, Mother," she said calmly. "He has been nothing but respectful to me while he told me about his life growing up as an orphan and how he got into being a painter. Jane is the only friend I have here—are you going to stop me from having another?"

"Only if you are sure that is what it is," her mother called back though Rachel heard high skepticism in her voice.

With the steady and disheartening belief that there was nothing she could do to win over her parents, Rachel left for her room. She had to start preparing for her sitting with William in a half-an-hour, but she sank to a chair even while knowing that.

What would it take to prove to her family that she did not want to marry Lord Thistlelake or Lord Yardley?

I suppose I had not forgotten them as I believed.

“My Lady?” Jane asked. “The sitting in quarter-of-hour...are you all right?”

“No,” Rachel said. “But it does not matter much. What dress do I have to wear to the sitting?”

Instead of moving off to the wardrobe, Jane sat near her. “Are you sure that you do not want to tell me? I can see that you are distressed.”

“There is nothing to say,” Rachel shrugged. “It has been said before, and since I cannot see a way out of it, what is the sense of rehashing it all?”

“To give you peace of mind?”

“It has not before, and I will not now,” Rachel dismissed. “I have cried

about it. I have grumbled about it, and nothing has changed. Now, about the dress.”

“But My Lady—”

“No, Jane,” Rachel snapped, then pressed her lips tightly together. Turning her head away, she sighed, “I am sorry, I did not mean to do that, but I am a bit tense and distressed.”

Jane gave her an understanding smile. “I realize, My Lady. Let me go fetch that dress.”

As soon as she stepped into the library, William asked her, “What is wrong?”

Rachel’s lips were pressed tight. On top of all the irritation that had brewed inside her from her mother’s dismissive remarks, it irked her that she was that transparent to William.

“Nothing, I am fine.” She waved her hand.

He looked from her to Jane, who only discreetly coughed and turned her head. When William turned back to her, Rachel was set to call this session off, but then he did something odd. He pulled the drapes to turn the room shadowy, then reached for her hand and drew her into a dancing position—the most scandalous of them all: the waltz.

“Pretend that is it just you and me,” he said before stepping forward, forcing her to follow. “Nothing outside of this room exists; only you and I in a castle far into the mountains overlooking a lake. Everything is peaceful; all is right. You have not a care in the world.”

The irritation still ripe inside her heart had Rachel fighting against his soothing voice. Nothing he could say would move that anger away—but William must have realized it.

“Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she said. “Why?”

“Close your eyes and follow me,” he said.

Though unwilling, Rachel obeyed and danced with him around the room. “You’re alone with the man you love, and there is no one to tell you what to do or how to do it. You are free to do all you want, do what you love, go wherever you want; you are now the person you wanted to see in the mirror.

He spun her. “All the problems from the life you left behind are nothing but faint memories now. Hypocritical women and stuffed-shirt lords are long behind you...”

Rachel’s chest expanded at the thought of not having to bow to others to run her life. She tried to push away the irritation inside her and

think about the life William was telling her about. It still felt outlandish from all that she knew, but... it felt sweet.

“You have nothing to fear now...” he said quietly. “It’s all behind you.”

The dance slowed, and when they stopped, Rachel opened her eyes. When she spoke, the words she wanted to say were eclipsed. “When did you learn how to waltz?”

“One does not stay in manor houses for nearly ten years and not pick up a few things,” William said quietly while searching her eyes. “What I want you to understand is, soon enough, this will all be a memory.”

“I—” Rachel felt a bit mesmerized by William’s intent gaze. A spike of excitement ran through her, and for a moment, she forgot where she was. His gaze dropped to her lips, and she leaned in just that much.

His head canted to the side, and a lock of his hair flopped over his heated gaze— Jane coughed.

The poignant interruption had Rachel snapping out of her daze and stepping away. Her breath was unsteady as she went to the divan. Seated, she tried to brush away the troubling feeling inside her chest but failed.

He had almost kissed me—and I would have let him do it.

When Jane came to arrange the blanket over her knees, Rachel could only give her a grateful smile.

William was back at his easel, but he stared at it blankly. He shook his head a little then reached for his pencils, but when he looked up, the heat in his gaze had not dissipated. With her heart in her throat, Rachel wondered what was going through his mind—and if it were anything like the feelings she was trying to put at bay, they were in trouble.

Chapter 7

It hurt him when Rachel had rushed out of the library the day before as if her heels were on fire, but William understood. The feelings he had for her too were scaring him too.

Now, in the wee hours of the morning, after another fitful night, William braced his arms on the windowsill and waited for morning to dawn. His weary eyes gazed blankly out into the darkness, hunting for the faint grey to start eroding the darkness.

As the sky began to lighten, revealing the ghostly trails of mist creeping along the ground, he managed a smile. Morning and twilight were the most mystical hours of the day. Just as his hand was reaching for his pencil, his eye landed on a tiny form huddled on a bench in the center of the maze.

The fall of dark hair told him who it was, and without thinking, he grabbed his cloak and rushed out.

Why is Rachel out there crying?

It did not matter that he was only in his sleep shirt and a pair of loose trousers or that he was barefoot; he had to get to her. Her hair was falling pell-mell over her shoulders while her legs were tucked to her chin. The thin dressing-gown she had on looked damp right through, and he heard her soft sobs before she heard him approaching.

It was only when he wrapped his cloak around her that she startled. A

heated lance of pain rammed through William when he saw the bright glisten of tears in her eyes and the wet marks down her cheeks.

“No—” She tried to push him away, but William was not budging. “Get away from me.”

“I won’t,” he said tightly. “What is wrong?”

“N-nothing,” she said. “Nothing, just leave me be.”

“No,” William said, as he wrapped his arms around her shoulder and tugged her into his chest. “You would not be out here at the break of day, cold and shivering if it weren’t something grave. Tell me, what is it? I want to help.”

“You can’t help!” She replied tightly. “No one can. They already made my bed, and now I must lie in it. I—I c-cannot escape. The ball is tonight, and I must meet, and d-dance with all the men they tell me tonight. If I do not charm the men that they want to m-marry me, I will never hear the end o-of it.”

She was shivering, and William held her even tighter. “And you—” she whispered. “Why did you have to come, and m-make feel things I n-never expected to feel?”

He peeled his head away from where it was resting on top of her head, “What?”

“You!” She did a miserable job at glaring at him. “From the day you arrived, I have felt things I never expected to feel. You tried to kiss me —”

“And?” William cocked his head to the side while allowing his voice to drop.

She looked so hopeless and lost. “And I would have let you.” Her whisper was so faint that he would not have heard it if he had not been inches away from her.

He should have moved away; instead, he curled a finger under her chin. The rasp of his toughened skin made her breath hitch—a welcoming sound to his soul.

His eyes searched her, “So you feel it too...may I kiss you now?”

She closed her eyes and tilted her head up, lips trembling and lashes fluttering. As adorable as her innocent motion was, he would have to tread carefully. She did not know what a kiss was or how potent it could be.

With his hands gently cradling her head, he lowered his mouth to hers. Her lips were as soft and plump as they looked, and at the first light brush of his lips across hers, the moon and sun could have collided, and William would never been any the wiser.

The attraction inside him blazed awake and felt a tremble of awareness pass through her as well. Singing flames ignited from their single point of connection, spreading through his veins like wildfire.

He could feel her responding to the fire, too, because with a tremulous sigh, her lips parted.

Instead of taking what she was offering, he lifted his head. He had to find out how comfortable she was with going further. He did not want to scare her more than he knew she already was.

As he mastered over the hot swell of desire inside him, her eyelashes fluttered open to reveal stunned emerald eyes. He did not ask a word, the pleading emotion told him all, and he lowered his lips again.

Then the kiss deepened the undercurrent of lust stirred within him. Her arms circled his neck, and he pressed her hand to his chest. She gave him entrance to her mouth, and he explored her warmth as if he were searching for gold. His tongue slid against hers, and he felt pleased when she hesitantly reciprocated.

He moaned, and the kiss grew hotter when she sunk her fingers into his hair. His lungs burned, but he could not get enough, so when he pulled away to let them breathe, his lips traveled to suck her earlobe and to lick his way down her neck.

A whimper left her mouth, and though it sounded like a whimper of want, William was not leaving it to chance and pulled away. But not too far.

He held her face tenderly. "You are stunning, Rachel. I wish I could be the one you would choose."

He did not mean to sadden her, but his words did. Her eyes brimmed

with tears again, and he cursed himself for putting her back in the same grief he had tried to pull her away from.

“I’m sorry,” he murmured while tucking her head under his chin and running his hand from the base of her neck to the small of her back. “I did not mean that. I hate to see you cry.”

“I-I don’t know what I’m going to do,” she whispered. “I feel so trapped.”

Unable to offer a solution, William could only hold her. He dropped light kisses on her hairline, trying to soothe her, but soon found that it was not helping. He dropped a light kiss on her eyes, her cheeks, and the tips of her ears.

He whispered comforting, soothing, and encouraging words into her ears, hoping with all his heart that they did not sound hollow. By the time the sun was a smidge over the horizon, Rachel was quiet in his arms, but her breath still hitched here and there.

While she had calmed, William knew that she was not comforted. Still, he was dually worried—not only because of her distress but about her parents finding her outside, in her nightclothes, with him. No matter how it would be interpreted, it would not look good for her to be discovered.

He hated having to leave her when she was so vulnerable, but he knew it would be worse for her if her parents caught them.

“Sweetheart,” he said tenderly. “I do not want to leave you, but I

think it's best if you head inside. It's after dawn, and I think your parents might be summoning you soon."

She sighed against his skin; the gentle stream of her breath against his skin evoked a prickle of gooseflesh on his neck. Rachel nodded and pressed the back of her hand against her eyes. "I know."

Unable to stop himself, William brushed the fingertip of his forefinger over her wet lash. "If it were up to me, I would stay here with you for as long as you needed, but I cannot."

She attempted to smile, but it fell flat. "I wish it would be so too."

Rachel gently removed his cloak from her and handed it to him. "Thank you, William. I'll see you on the morrow."

"I hope for the best, Rachel," he said.

As she went off, William clutched his cloak on his lap. He had to force his feet to stay where they were because he was liable to leap up and rush after her. When she disappeared through the doors, the rigidity in his body vanished.

He felt his heart grip at the thought of another man tasting Rachel's lips. While he had no standing to feel jealous against whoever it might, he still felt the burn of it smoldering in his heart.

Getting to his feet, William left for his rooms and passed maids

rushing from room to room to prepare for the ball that evening. From what he knew, the family was going to hold three balls, two sennight apart, and the painting would be displayed that night.

He could always rest that evening or take a walk to the nearby town. He washed quickly and went to the window with his drawing book. He did not have to search for inspiration; Rachel was occupying his mind, and all he had to do was grasp his pencil.

Heavy-hearted, Rachel entered her room, thankfully with her mother none-the-wiser about her absence. Jane, however, was a bit frantic, "My Lady, Her Grace will be here soon. She is fixed in making this night memorable for all the ton."

Rachel looked at her. "He kissed me, Jane."

It took her maid a moment to realize what she meant, but when she did, Jane's mouth dropped in shock. "Mr. Smith kissed you?"

"Yes," she said while sinking to a chair, feeling her fingers tremble. She made sure to clasp them on her lap, then admitted, "It was more than I had imagined it would be, Jane. I have heard about how kisses are, but I never expected to feel it. It was passionate and sensual, and I think William genuinely cares for me."

Instead of looking impressed, Jane looked troubled, "While I am happy for you, this might be the worst thing for you *today*. It is the day of the ball, My Lady. Are you going to concentrate on meeting the

Lords if you will be thinking about Mr. Smith?"

"I will have to find a way," Rachel said while standing. "I still do not know why Mother is doing this as my dresses are horrid. The only reason these men are coming is that my parents are wealthy. I would not be surprised if some of them are fortune-seekers."

Jane nodded, "Shall I call for your breakfast and your bath now?"

"Yes, please."

As her maid moved off, Rachel turned her head to the window, beautiful emerald eyes flashing in her head, and immediately, warm, tingling desire settled in her chest what she would do to feel his kiss again. The mere thought of it had her insides melting liquid.

Her fingertips pressed on her lips again with hope.

Jane had done the finishing touches on her hair and dress, but because her dress was plain, the focal point was to be her hair. It was down to her waist and strewn through with a single string of pearl.

Her heart was lodged in her throat while she stopped at the top of the stairs that led to the ballroom. Her father was standing beside her in a full dark suit, and his commanding presence was likely to deter any snide looks or comments at her drab dress.

The butler cleared his throat. “Announcing, His Grace, Duke Hurstmere, George Hampton and Lady Rachel Hampton.”

Descending the steps to the massive ballroom, Rachel surveyed the gay scene. Women were dressed in every shade of the spectrum, and men were in dark suits and impeccably tied neck cloths. Rachel had expected a drab room, but pots of flowers were dotted around the room, and the soft scents of lavender and lily-of-the-valley perfumed the air.

She felt dozens of eyes on her, but she kept her head up and did not look at anyone until she got to the bottom steps. She spotted a few men lingering at the room’s mouth that held the buffet tables overflowing with picnic foods.

They were surrounded by a circle of ladies, all in the latest stylish, French-styled dresses, silk fans in their hands. They stood with a coy elegance that Rachel wished she knew how to mimic. She could only wonder how they kept conversation; as far as she knew, men and women had little topics in common.

“Ah, Lord Banbury,” her father said, naming one of the three men they had indicated they wanted her to marry.

Rachel tore her gaze away from a sandy-haired, handsome man who stood at the end of the room to face a lord who was paunchy, balding, and kept mopping his face with a sodden handkerchief.

It took all she could not to recoil in horror.

“Your Grace,” the man nodded while tucking the cloth into his inner pocket. “Lovely ball you have, my compliments to Her Grace. And Lady Hampton, I am incredibly pleased to meet you.”

She curtsied, “You too, My Lord.”

Lord Banbury turned to her father and struck up a conversation while Rachel felt her stomach sink to her feet. Why this man? Why him? He was at least three times her age, looked frightful, and smelled a little musty. Did her parents hate her that much to pair her with such a man?

Rachel was tempted to turn and run. But she could not embarrass her parents and disgrace their house. Later that night, or possibly the next morning, she would tell them that under no circumstances would she marry Lord Banbury.

When the two men finished their polite discussion, they moved off, and her father introduced her to Lord Thistlelake. This man was thin, gangly, and gaunt, the opposite of Banbury, but still hideous. His voice was monotone, droning, and she felt anger build inside her.

Is this how my parents think of me, only worthy of marrying these horrid men?

The only mercy she had was when her father conversed with him instead of letting her speak with him. She had not known what to say if he had drawn her into the conversation.

Lord Yardley was younger than both Thistlelake and Banbury, but even with his thick dark hair and friendly smile, Rachel felt something about him was still not right.

Just as their introductions were made, the first dance was called, and he offered to be her partner. The Minuet dance was a slow, minimal contact dance that had her craving for William's warm hold and tender touch.

When the dance ended, she made her excuses and went to the refreshment room. The night had just started, but it already felt long and dreary.

How am I to survive this night?

She left the room only to stop behind a tall plant. She could see the tall plumes of a ladies' head ornaments and heard them giggle.

"I stand mistaken; tonight is not the disaster I had thought," one said.

"Only if you consider Lady Hampton's dress," another sneered. "Who wears rose-pink velvet dresses anymore?"

"How wicked of you, Lady Julia, you know that her parents have a stronghold on her life. Poor thing looks so depressed to me," the first one replied.

“She will be more depressed if she marries any of those men,” the first said. “Thistlelake is a three-time widower, and to this day, we do not know how his wives died. Banbury has a scandal with a French lord’s wife that he is trying to keep hush-hush, and Yardley has a secret gambling addiction a mile wide and three times longer. Not to mention the reported personal, erm, endowments.”

“Endowments aside, why would they dare latch her to those men?”

“All three are close to the Regent,” the other said. “I suppose that might be it. Shoe-ins with the ear of the crown. Rather cruel of the Duke and Duchess, I would think.”

As the ladies tittered, Rachel turned away, her cheeks burning in anger. So that was it—political clout! That was why they would sell her off to the highest bidder to get more power—even knowing the faults the men had. If those ladies had known them all, she was sure her father and mother knew them too.

She could not believe this was how they thought her place in life was to be—a pawn? Halfway to the ballroom, she stopped in her place while her mother pandered to Lord Yardley. She felt sickened.

Looking around, Rachel spotted Jane at the seated section of the room and went to her maid instead of her parents.

“Jane,” she said quietly. “I don’t feel well. Will you tell my parents, please? I have to rest.”

Jane blanched, and Rachel instantly regretted it. It was cowardly of her to let Jane take the brunt of her parent's anger, so she shook her head, "I'm sorry; you won't have to do it. I will tell them myself."

Nervously enough for her fingers to start trembling, Rachel found her Mother first. "Pardon me, Mother, but I am not feeling well. I need to go rest."

Lady Mary's lips pinched, and her face soured. "You are not ill."

"Yes, I am." Rachel said, her eyes narrowing. She could not and would not tell her mother what she had heard about the Lords and humiliate them all. But she would not stay and allow them to barter her off like a fattened calf. "If I do not leave now, I will be proving it to you in one of your potted plants."

She had never been so daring and bold with her mother but considering what they were using her for, she felt she had a right to be. Instead of cowering, she stood tall and even notched her head up a little. From the corner of her eyes, she spotted a few people looking at them curiously, and from the way her mother's face soured, she had realized it too.

"Fine," Lady Mary said tightly. "Go."

With a curt nod, she left toward the stairs with Jane a mere step behind her. She kept silent until entering her rooms, and there she spun. "Do you know why my parents are pushing me to marry one of these men, Jane? To get close to the Regent—that's why. It is not for any other reason than to get connections!"

“Goodness, no!” Jane spluttered.

Incensed, Rachel told her maid all she heard about the three men that her parents were considering for her to marry. “And you cannot tell me that they do not know about all those. I wager that they do not even care.”

She sunk to a seat, drained, sickened, and horrified. “My own parents would do such a thing to me.”

Jane embraced her. “I am so sorry. I never thought that they would do something like that.”

“Well, I suppose they thought that if I cannot marry for love, that is the only other option,” Rachel said tiredly. “I do feel sickened by it. Will you help me disrobe; I must lay down.”

She stood, and after they did away with the hairdo, then the dress. In her nightclothes, she slid into bed and pulled a pillow to her chest. The more she thought about her parents’ deceit, the more her heart grew heavy and her soul hollow.

How can I escape this?

Chapter 8

For the first time since he had been at the Hampton's house, William heard raised voices—and one of them was Rachel's. He came to the mouth of the sitting room to hear more.

"You knew!" she cried out. "You both knew that those men are not good for me but are best for you!"

"What on earth are you talking about?" the Duchess snapped.

"Last night, I heard two ladies speaking about these men, and I quote, *ad verbatim*, Thistlelake is a three-time widower, and to this day, we do not know how his wives died."

"That is a lie!"

"Banbury has a scandal with a French lord's wife that he is trying to keep hush-hush," Rachel continued.

"Scandalous!"

"Lord Yardley has a secret gambling addiction a mile wide and three times longer," Rachel said. "They are not lies, and you both knew it. Why would you think they would be the best husbands for me?"

“Listen here,” her mother said. “We are your parents, and we know what is best for you—”

“But chaining me to a debtor, an adulterer, and a widower is *best*?” Rachel nearly screamed. “I am not marrying any of them.”

“Now, daughter,” the Duke’s stern tone cut in. “You must listen to what we are saying. Those men are staid choices for you.”

“They are at least twice my age,” Rachel said. “Why would you not choose a Lord that is somewhere near my age. A lord, a university graduate, a tradesman, something, but I will *not* marry a man who is *thrice* my age.”

“Rachel!” Her mother gasped. “How dare you!”

“No, Mother,” Rachel said calmly. “Why is that you need these men to get a connection with the Regent? Do you not have enough power?”

“That is it,” Mary said strictly. “You are out of order, and I am ordering you to go to your room and stay there until we goto church this evening. You will need to repent.”

“Just tell me the truth,” Rachel said. “Is gaining more connections the reason you need me to marry? Do you not think of my happiness and desires at all?”

A pointed silence rested in the room until the Duke said, "Yes, it was for political aspirations and more connections with the Regent, but we believed that these men would do right by you."

Stunned that the man had admitted to the shocking truth, William decided it would be prudent to leave and go back to the room he was supposed to meet with Rachel in soon. He entered the library and placed the outline of her on the easel.

It angered him that the Duke and Duchess were only using Rachel as a pawn for their machinations. He burned inside at the feeling that she would be disrespected that way.

He realized that he might not see Rachel that morning, but he stayed in the room in happenstance that he would. He paced the library, reading the spines here and there, plucking out a few and replacing them. The hollow echoes of the clock's chimes told him that he had been there for over two hours.

I suppose she will not be coming to her sitting today.

Ruffling his hair, William turned to the door only for it to be pushed in. Rachel came in first, looking a bit pale, but her eyes sparkled with life and - more evident—victory. He supposed that she had gotten her parents to listen to her about the marriage.

...a Lord that is somewhere near my age. A lord, a university graduate, a tradesman, something, but I will not marry a man who is thrice my age.

The jealous emotion from earlier that morning still held strong—it

would cut him in half to see her with another man, but it was going to be inevitable.

He bowed, "My Lady, and Miss Colton."

"Sorry to keep you waiting, Mr. Smith," she said smiling. "My parents and I were having a...erm... discussion."

"How was the ball last night?" he asked.

"Disastrous, but enlightening," Rachel said as she lay on the couch. Miss Colton placed the blanket over her knees and handed her the book. "I know it sounds bizarre to describe it that way, but that was how it was."

"Were you here for the festivities, Mr. Smith?" Miss Colton asked him politely.

His brow cocked up. It was the first time she had spoken to him. "I would not say that as I had not left my room. I did hear the music until about three in the wee hours, though."

Though he replied to the maid, his eyes were on Rachel and wondered why she ducked her head and bit a corner of her lip. "Was it a merry event though, My Lady?"

She looked up. "I do not know. I left it in under half an hour."

“May I ask why?”

Opening the book, she said, “I was not feeling well.”

Feeling it prudent not to prod, William moved to his easel. “How horrible on the best day of your life.”

“One of them,” Rachel said. “It is only one of them.”

The pride he heard in her voice made him smile as he plucked up his pencil. “Glad to hear that.”

While meandering through the twisting trails of the maze that evening, William was surprised when he found Rachel there, sitting at the base of the fountain and gazing up into the sky.

“Oh—” he exclaimed. “Surprising to see you here. I had thought you would be at church.”

Her gaze snapped to him, “Why would you think so?”

Unwilling to confess that he had overheard her and her family

arguing, he shrugged, “Is it not a part of your life?”

Rachel’s eyes narrowed, but she inclined her head. “It is, but not tonight. My parents are away, though.”

He joined her at the statue's base and reached for her hand. It was warm, and her grip matched his. “Pray tell, why are you here, alone?”

“I—” she sighed. “I needed some air. My parents have told me that they are arranging three more balls for me instead of two more. I told them this morning that I...was not particular to any of the Lords they introduced me to. After a spirited conversation, they agreed to find other suitors.”

His lips twitched at her description of the argument as a spirited conversation.

“What was it about these men that you did not like?” he asked.

Instead of telling him, she leaned on his shoulder and tilted her head up. “You said that you are a romantic, so you know what women dream about a lord. Tall, handsome, trim, muscular, a knight of the olden times, rugged but has a sweet touch. A man who is protective, brilliant, caring and who sees me as the stars and the moon to his life.”

“Aye.”

She tilted her head up, “I did not get to know any of the lords, but the

ones I met certainly failed the handsome, tall, muscular, and trim aspect. And—" she wrinkled her delicate retroussé nose, "—they were as old as Moses."

A peal of laughter burst from him; his head threw back at the humor at her unexpected jab. His arm wrapped around her shoulders, and he pressed a kiss to her hairline.

"I would have loved to see that," he chuckled.

She rested a hand on his chest and nestled into his neck. "I would have rather not been there."

"Not one of them met my standards," Rachel said. "I had seen a few there, but they were not there to meet me, and I doubt my parents would have been pleased if I went off on my own to meet them."

Burying his nose in her hair, William breathed in the soft scent of jasmine oil on her thick strands. "And for these next balls, you will meet more."

"That is the notion," she said. "I still want romance, Will. I want to know the smallest details of the man who will be my husband. I want to know what makes him laugh, what makes him sad, and hurt. I want to know how to pluck a flower, give him a smile, a kiss, something to cheer him. And I want him to do the same for me."

"And what about if he does not meet your parent's expectations," William asked.

“I do not care about money,” she said. “I told myself that if the man does not have a farthing to his name but loves me, I would choose him more than a man as rich as Croesus. I do not know if my parents fully understand what I am saying, but at least they are beginning to realize that I am not going to marry someone I do not want.”

He kissed her temple, “How hard was it to tell them that?”

“It was terrifying,” she laughed softly. “My heart was pounding in my ears, and I could barely get the words out. But I was angry enough that I could say them.”

“How did they receive your challenge to their authority?” William gently prodded.

“My mother was aghast, but my father was a bit more malleable,” Rachel answered. “They will not force me to marry a man who is thrice my age, but I must marry from the next set of lords they choose. The only concession I have is that the men are younger.”

Taking her hand, William interlaced their fingers. “I’m sorry.”

She shrugged. “If that is the only reprieve I can get, I will take it.”

He felt a bit conflicted—which, again, made little sense as he had no claim on Rachel. Yes, she stirred a fire inside him, and he felt outraged about the hardship and the pain her parents were putting her under, but he felt hamstrung—it was not as if he could rescue her

from it. He was only a nomadic painter with no home and nothing to use to care for her.

And it ripped his soul raw.

He only kissed her hairline though he wanted to bestow upon her a scintillating, intimate kiss, where the world around them would fade away into nothing.

“What do you think you will do if the Lord is not the one you dreamed about?” William asked. “No one is going to match all you want, but tell me the one thing that would make you say no.”

She went pensive. “If he had no sense of romance, and if he is not tenderhearted, that would make me say no.”

“And if your parents do force you to marry anyway?”

Rachel paled. “I...I don’t what then.”

Hearing her fear, William gently turned her face to him. With his thumb on her chin, he asked, “May I kiss you?”

“Yes.”

His blood pounded in his ears as he slanted his lips over hers and felt

pride sing through his blood as they opened for him. He reveled in the softness of her mouth and the sweet taste that lingered on her tongue. She had eaten some sugar buns and the flavor of it—of her—was addictive beyond reason.

All he knew was that he wanted—needed—more. He drove his tongue deeply, exploring her as was still unfamiliar to him, groaning as his tongue brushed across hers. At the wet, sinuous tangling of their tongues, he felt his body's reaction, and his member began to thicken.

Sliding his hands through her hair, he held her fast while he feasted on her kiss. When he pulled away to let her breathe, the sight of her red and swollen lips from his kisses made a surge of pride and desire rush inside him.

"You are utterly beautiful," he murmured. "Your soul is pure, Rachel, a blinding white that only angels have. I wish others could be as soulful and gentle of you."

She touched his face. "You are so kind, William."

"You deserve more than kindness," William replied while holding her hand tightly. "You should get all the desires of your heart."

She whispered something so low that he dared to believe that she had said, "I wish it were you."

Darkness had fallen, and again, William feared her parents coming upon them, but he did not say it then. He brushed his lips across her cheek. "I am glad for you."

Rachel rested her head on his chest for a moment, then pulled away. “We will see how long that lasts. I should go inside.”

He managed a wan smile and expected her to leave, but instead of stepping away, she leaned in and kissed his cheek softly. “Thank you and have a restful night.”

“You as well,” he uttered.

William waited until the moon was high and the stars were bright before he went back inside.

He was staring at the outline of the newest portrait with a critical eye and found the niggling desire to erase half of it so he could draw out the process of making the painting. It would be unethical...but he wanted more time with Rachel.

He stood, twiddling his pencils while waiting for Rachel to enter the room to start her sitting. He brushed back a lock of his hair from his eyes just as he heard the door of the library being opened.

Turning on his heel, he made to greet Rachel—but her name died on his lips. It was not Rachel who had entered, but instead, it was her mother. And from the look on her face, it was not going to be a cordial discussion.

Chapter 9

Rachel felt unusually light as she walked to the library. The kiss she had shared with William the night before still lingered on her lips as she palmed the doorknob to push the door open—but at the sound of her mother’s voice, stopped dead in her tracks.

“Mr. Smith are you in some way enabling my daughter into these ridiculous notions that she needs love to marry?” her mother snapped to William.

“No, Your Grace,” William said. “Perhaps Lady Hampton holds that desire on her own?”

“But where in heaven’s name would she get that idea!” Lady Mary railed. “Love is not needed in a marriage. Goodness knows her father and I are married because of mutual respect and because it is right, not for some flimsy notion like *love*.”

The scorn in her mother’s voice had Rachel’s heart sinking to her feet. How could she not believe in love?

“Is that not the hope of any lady her age, Your Grace? To find love and affection with a man who shares the same sentiment?” William asked.

Lady Mary scoffed. “Ridiculous! Utterly ridiculous! I know you artist sort. You all have some fanciful, eccentric, romantic ideals that spread like an infection. If you had something to do with my daughter’s

notion about romance, I will have you dismissed!”

To save William from having to lie to her mother, Rachel walked in. “Please do not accuse him, Mother. I want to marry for love because, in my view, love is right. Adam loved Eve, didn’t he? Abraham loved Sarah, didn’t he? Why not live how God told us to live?”

Her mother’s face soured as if she’d sucked on a lemon. “And you gained all this from the Bible?”

“Yes,” Rachel lied.

Lady Mary’s lips thinned, but she shot a look to William all the same before going back to Rachel. “Love tends to blind you to reality, daughter.”

“I understand, but it is a chance I want to take,” Rachel replied.

With her lips still pinched, Lady Mary left the room, and before Rachel sat on the chaise, she went to William and rested a hand on his arm. “I am sorry about that.”

He gave her a thin smile. “Your mother was concerned, Rachel. It is plain to see.”

She heard Jane’s soft gasp of surprise and realized that her friend was not aware of the familiarity between her and William. Deciding to explain it to Jane later, Rachel pulled away to take her seat. Jane

settled the blanket over her legs and rested a book on her lap while giving her a questioning look. Rachel only shook her head as if saying, not now.

Understanding it, Jane sat on a seat on the other side of the room while William took up his pencils. She tried to keep her composure, but the anger about her mother confronting William smoldered deep in her chest, and she was sure that it flashed on her face at times. She could not believe how horrid her mother had been to William.

Why does Mother hate the very notion of love? It's like poison to her.

Here and there, she caught a concerned look growing on William's face, and about an hour in, he called for a break.

"Miss Colton," he said. "Would you please get us some refreshments? Water or any other drink if the kitchen has it."

Before Jane moved, she looked to Rachel for confirmation, and when Rachel nodded, only then did Jane leave the room. William closed the door behind her, then went to Rachel's side, slid a hand around her neck, and kissed her.

The kiss was tender and soothing, slow, and showed none of the heat and ardor she had felt from him before. His movements were calming, like gentle worship. He was calming her. When William pulled away, he was smiling.

"Don't take what your mother said to heart," he said kindly. "She is only looking out for you."

“No,” Rachel corrected him. “She is looking out for herself. My parents want me to marry to get more clout with the capital. The three men they wanted me to marry were men with close contact to the Prince Regent.”

“That would matter, but I am not taking her words in any negative way. She was right; artists are the romantic sort, so it is reasonable that she would suspect me. I imagine that you never made the declaration that you wanted to find a romantic partner before?”

“No.”

“Then you could see why she came to that conclusion,” William stood and brushed her cheek with his knuckles. “Don’t fret about it too much, Rachel.”

The smooth push of the door—Jane’s reentrance—had him stepping away and going back to his easel. Jane rested the glass of lemonade on the table, and they took a few more moments to drink.

Rachel drank half her glass while thinking about William’s words. He was not fazed by her mother, and she wondered why. How was he not insulted? The morning hours passed with the question still heavy on Rachel’s mind and lingered there when her mother called for her to get dressed. Soon they were off to church.

It was late when Rachel and her family arrived home from a long, tedious service and sermon. She privately wondered if her mother had a hand in the priest's sermon because he had droned on about sin of disobedience and how control should be dealt with. A wife should submit to her husband, and children should submit to their parents.

But Rachel had made up her mind; she was not going to live a loveless marriage like the one her parents did. She uttered her goodnights to them then went to her rooms. It was late, so she did not bother calling Jane to help and disrobed alone.

She donned her nightclothes and slid into bed, only to feel the crinkle of paper under her hand. Curious, she plucked the paper up to peer at it. Thankfully, the firelight from the grate was enough for her to make out a drawing of a woman, her face hidden by a mask made of feathered wings. On closer inspection, Rachel realized that it was her face.

William had drawn her as the angel he saw her as. It was a beautiful picture, and she treasured it. It was a bit frightening how William had seen through her pretense of being as impassive as her parents. And more disturbing was how instinctively she responded to him. Not only to his kisses and his touch, but to how his eyes would skim over her and the small smiles he gave her when he thought that she was not looking.

He must have given the drawing to Jane.

Carefully folding it in half, she slid it into her bedside table and closed it. For once, she wondered if William had a lady friend somewhere. Surely a man as handsome as he would have admirers somewhere. He did not kiss with hesitation, which told her he had experience with women.

Of course, he has experience; he is ten years older than I. Unless he is a monk, he must have some involvement with women.

But why did that conclusion make her stomach sink?

Resisting the urge to stick a finger in the high neck of her dress, Rachel tried to focus on the conversation around her. To her surprise, the night after she had interrogated William, her mother had taken her to ball held in their neighborhood.

Compared to the other ladies in silk dresses and hairs done up with jeweled ornaments, Rachel still felt like an object of curiosity in her high-collar outdated velvet dress and simple hairstyle. When the dance was called, breaking up the conversation, she was prepared to take her seat at the sidelines with all the other wallflowers there, but a Lord stopped.

“Lady Hampton,” he bowed. “I am Julius Bennet, Earl of Strathmore. May I have this dance?”

Rachel blinked. Disbelief washed through her that such a handsome Lord, tall, fair-haired with bright green eyes, was asking *her* to dance. When they were more fashionable, graceful women around. She heard the music begin and rushed to say, “Oh, yes, yes.”

She took his extended hand and was swept to the dance floor for the Cotillion. She danced with her heart somewhere in her throat, double guessing every move she made. Only when the dance ended did she feel relief that she had not stumbled or made a wrong step.

Lord Strathmore took her arm. "You have a graceful step, My Lady."

"Thank you." Rachel reddened as he led her to the refreshment tables. "You...erm, dance well too. May I ask, where did you go to school?"

"Eton, then Cambridge," he replied over a glass of punch while Rachel had water. "I spent a semester in America at the Yale University at New Haven."

A thread of jealousy ran through her. For most of her life, she had wanted to travel, but her parents had stated that not only would she not be leaving London, but that she would never leave *England*.

"That is very fortunate of you," she added. "To travel, I mean."

He gave her a proud smile. "America is a fascinating country. A little rustic and undeveloped, but the masters do have a good grasp of what they are teaching. How about you, My Lady?"

"I was schooled at home," Rachel said. "And I also did finishing school at home. My parents were worried that I would be drawn off the righteous path by the influence of the other girls."

“I see,” he nodded.

Her stomach sank a little at his tone. It felt as if he were drawing away from her with her admission. Resting the glass down, Rachel gave him a wan smile. “I am not like these other ladies as you can see —” she brushed her hand down her drab dress, “—so if you would not want to see me again, I understand.”

His brows lifted. “Why doubt yourself so much?”

“It's not doubt,” Rachel said deprecatingly. “It's truth. I know little about life outside of my home that it is mortifying when I come to London. Despite that my parents want me to marry, I am a bit hobbled when it comes to that because I know so little.”

She smiled. “Thank you for the wonderful dance. I hope you have a great evening.”

Turning away to the seats, Rachel felt his eyes on her back as she walked away. She liked him, but it was evident that he did not feel the same. How could she when she was as outdated and old-fashioned and passé as her clothes?

Seated, she trained her gaze out the window to the garden beyond it. This was a mistake; she could feel it. This world was as unfamiliar to her as if she were a fish trying to live on dry land. And it was all because of her parents. How could they raise her in seclusion and then shove her into *le beau monde* as if she could magically integrate herself into it?

From the corner of her eyes, she spotted two ladies, debutantes, she supposed, from their full white clothing, giggling to each other. Aside from the debutants, another set of ladies in colorful silks, spoke to two lords without hesitation and inelegance. A twist of resentment rested heavy on her heart.

I have no friends to speak with, nor do I have the social elegance I should have to speak with the men.

She stood to find her mother. This farce had gone long enough, and she wanted to go home. Finding her mother in a drawing-room, she calmly asked her to speak privately.

With them standing at the window away from the rest of the ladies, she said, "I want to go home, Mother. This was a mistake, coming here."

"Why?"

"I do not..." she paused. "I cannot fit in with any of these ladies or lords, Mother. I am lost when they talk about current fashions or happenings in the city. I do not know a thing about what they are talking about, and I just stand there, unable to offer anything. It is humiliating, Mother, and I wish to leave."

Lady Mary did not look pleased. "Have you tried?"

"I have, but it does not matter is if I have tried or not," Rachel stressed. "I do not fit in with these people, Mother, and I am sick of trying. I want to go home."

“I will have the carriage carry you home as I am still engaged with some ladies here,” her mother said.

It was not what Rachel had thought would happen, but she was not complaining. At least, she would not be hearing her mother’s nitpicking at her for not trying hard enough.

With her mother beside her, they left for the foyer where Rachel donned her coat and waited while her mother sent a footman to call the carriage. She waited quietly with her mother, until the vehicle came around and she was helped into the bed.

“We will talk in the morning,” her mother promised.

While dreading that discussion, Rachel let herself unwind a little from the tension she had held all through the ball. Bittersweetly, she thought about Lord Strathmore. He was handsome and brilliant, she supposed, but she knew that she would never see him again.

Probably for the best. We might come from the same class but from far different lifestyles. We would never match...

But the question that lingered in her mind: who was her match?

Chapter 10

A full day had passed with little sight of Rachel. William wondered what she thought of the picture he had coerced her maid Miss Colton to slip into her room the night before. Now, with another night passing with her absence, William found himself in the early morning wondering what she thought about and if he would see her that day.

Rousing from the bed as the rose-golden rays of dawn came through the unadorned window, he passed to the window and glanced out briefly. He was looking to see if Rachel was outside in the hazy, mystic mist of dawn. He did not see her, so he went to wash up for the day.

He dressed in a loose saffron shirt and loose brown buff trousers before donning his boots and left for his morning meal. There would a few hours before his session with Rachel—if there was going to be one that day—but went back to his room to prepare for it anyhow.

He gathered his material, took the folio with the unfinished drawing to the library, and set up the easel. In the meantime, he began to peruse the shelves and saw books on history, some on law and art, and French grammar. There were no storybooks, nothing on philosophy or sciences. No biology, mathematics, or astrology.

I suppose with their devout faith, astrology, using the stars as a guide, would be heretical.

He meandered to another shelf and spotted more of the same. No wonder Rachel knew little of the world beyond what was taught to her. It became clear why she wanted to leave to see more of the world

because she knew so little of it.

The door's opening had him coming back to the front and did not hide the wide smile at seeing Rachel and her maid there.

He bowed. "Good morning, My Lady. How are you this morning?"

"I am well," she smiled faintly. "And you?"

"Very eager to immortalize your image on paper and hopefully oils," he then nodded to Miss Colton. "And good morning to you too."

Soon, Rachel was seated on her chase, and his pencils were flying over the paper. He kept flickering his gaze to her and noted the placid, almost resigned look on her face and wondered why some of her fire had dimmed.

Something must have happened last night.

"How was your night?" he asked.

As he feared, she went tense for a moment. She was telling him, wordlessly, that his assumption was right. He kept his tone light and his gaze down on the paper, allowing her time to reply.

"It was enlightening, to say the least," she muttered.

“Why do you say that?” he asked while shading in a curl of her hair.

She turned a page of the book. Her tone was low and bitter. “I have come to realize, Mr. Smith, that I am, without a doubt, an abnormality to the ton. I have no illusions that if those in charge of the London publications did not fear my parents that I would be splashed all over their newspapers.”

His motions faltered a little, and his fingers tightened around the pencils. He could hear how angry, disappointed, and bitter she was about being cast as a pariah.

“I am sorry to hear that,” he said comfortingly.

She seemed to deflate. “Thank you.”

He gritted his teeth and bit back the words he wanted to say that were resting on his tongue. Instead, he continued to draw the image before him, but his mind was drawing another picture of her. One that he was going to draw later that night.

The door pushed open, and Lady Hurstemere came in, a self-satisfied look on her face.

“Daughter, I doubted you, but to my happy surprise, a suitor has come to call on you,” the Duchess said. “Lord Strathmore is here to see you.”

The book nearly tumbled from Rachel's lap. "Mister Bennet, er, Lord Strathmore is here? For me?"

"Yes," her mother said proudly. "Come along now. This sitting can wait a while."

William refrained from scowling but bowed to the lady and shared a fleeting look with Rachel as she scrambled from her seat and stood. When the door closed behind them, William placed the pencils down and wiped his hands.

Miss Colton looked a bit lost at having been left out in accompanying her mistress to refreshing for the visiting lord, so he gave her a sympathetic smile.

"Miss Colton, do you know if your mistress saw the drawing?"

She looked a bit unsure. "I believe she must have because it was not where I left it. But she has not mentioned anything to me about it this morning. I suppose she will talk about it later on."

"I suppose this might be it for today," William mentioned while closing the drawing in the folio. "I will be in my rooms if Her Grace decides to resume Lady Hampton's session. Good day, Miss Colton."

After gathering his material, he bowed his head and left for his rooms. There he set down the things on the table before taking out his

personal set of papers and flipping that folio open. Reaching for a new paper, he sat and began to draw the image of Rachel he had held in his mind.

As he had a predilection to do, he lost himself in his drawing, and by the time he pulled himself away from the fervency in his mind, it was past midday. He had missed a meal, but it did not matter much to him.

He stood on stiff, wooden legs and walked to the window while massaging the minor stiffness in his hand. As his eyes landed on the garden—rather the people in it—his body went rigid.

Rachel and this Lord Strathmore were there, meandering down the twisting lanes. There were not close or touching, but the man's mere presence irritated him. His grip on the railing was stiff enough of him to grow white-knuckled.

When Rachel tripped, he nearly launched forward just as the Lord reached for her. And when he dropped his hand to the small of her spine—he growled under his breath.

The surge of protectiveness and possessiveness he felt for Rachel was illogical because he had no claim on her. But his nature, his instinct, pushed him to want to rip her away from the Lord because, undoubtedly, he wanted her for himself.

Which again made no sense because there was no logical way he could be with her or have her in the way he wanted. But logic did not match emotion, and William knew that he was simmering with jealousy.

Take your hand away from her back, you nob.

Then, Rachel's head swiveled to him, and so did the Lord she was with. He pretended not to see her and retreated into his room, trying and failing to see past the red heat spiraling inside his chest.

"Who was that?" Lord Strathmore asked, his brows lowering, and the formation of a scowl begin to form on his face.

"Beg your pardon?" Rachel asked, with her heart leaping in her chest. "Who?"

"That man who was on a balcony just over there," Lord Strathmore gestured to the house and the terrace where William had once stood but was now empty.

"I don't see anyone," Rachel said while training her gaze in the direction Julius had pointed towards. "Perhaps it was one of my father's menservants? That is the servant wing, My Lord."

"I do not know," he said. "His look was not one of a servant's. He looked almost angry and was glaring at me."

"Well, I do not see him, and I do not think he matters," Rachel said

while reaching to rest a hand on the Lord's chest. "You were telling me how you work in the capital?"

Lord Strathmore's eyes skimmed over the still empty balcony with suspicious eyes before he turned back to face Rachel. "Ah, yes. As you know, I have my marquissdom, but I have a secular business. The Prince Regent has commissioned me to source personal objects for him. Things of curiosity and rarities that he finds interesting."

So, this is why mother is happy—another Lord that had an ear to the Regent.

Instantly, Rachel's stomach soured. He was handsome and young, all the things she had expressed to her parents that she wanted, and here he was, with a way into the Capital, which was what her parents wanted. He was the perfect man with the balance for her, which is what her parents would tell her.

She could imagine the discussion now, with them telling her that she had gotten what she wanted with the Lord, a young, handsome man. And Rachel could not deny it. But she did not want her or him to be a pawn in her parent's chess game.

"I see," she nodded. "If you are not breaking any rules, can you tell me what the oddest...well, oddity that the Prince requested?"

He laughed. "He asked me to find a boar baby rattle from Greco-Roman archaeological recoveries, and he asked me to find a flying squirrel from East India."

“A rattle? From that far back in history?”

“You would be surprised, My Lady,” he mentioned. “Since our civilization was formed from theirs, it would mean that their traditions came from them too. The Prince might be odious, but he is a learned and brilliant man. He recalled the Greek philosopher Aristotle says in one of his treatises that young children should be given one and many of them have the figure of a pig or a boar, so he asked for one.”

“But to what purpose?” Rachel marveled as she stopped at a rosebush.

He shrugged while reaching out for a flower. “I do not know, nor do I care to know. All I do is what he asks me to do.”

Snapping the flower off, he handed it to her. “I would compare the rose to your beauty, but your face far outweighs the simplicity of this flower.”

Rachel blushed. Taking the flower, she smiled, “Thank you.”

He leaned into her ear, “When we marry, I will free you from these horrid dresses. You deserve to be clothed in silks and satins. The finest cloths in the kingdom and be celebrated at the treasure you are.”

Jane’s subtle cough had them pulling apart, but his words still rang in her mind. His promise was tantalizing, and while a part of her wanted to see it, she knew that if she gave in, she would be damning her and him to the machinations of her parents.

“That is very...” she paused, “...appealing, My Lord.”

“It is my promise to you, My Lady,” he flashed her a grin. “I can get all the silks and satins you want. Gold from Egypt, jade from the East, and pure diamonds from Africa.”

He said it sincerely, but Rachel felt a bit conflicted. Did he want to marry her for her beauty, or did he want to marry her to make her a fashionable accessory on his arm?

“I am honored that you think so highly of me, My Lord,” she added.

“You deserve it,” he added as they began the stroll again. “Tell me, My Lady, what do you do for enjoyment?”

Brushing the flower over her cheek, Rachel snorted. “I would not say it for enjoyment, but the only place I do go to away from my home is our local church. I go to balls here and there, but church is all I know.”

He stopped short, eyes wide with shock. “Nowhere? Hyde Park? Drury Lane Theatre? Vauxhall?”

She gasped at the last one. “Vauxhall? The Pleasure Gardens? That place of sin? No, thank you.”

Lord Strathmore laughed. "Oh, you sweet naïf duckling. I am amused. No dear, the gardens are not a place of sin...well, not mostly. It is a place of magic and mystery with a tinge of intrigue and interest. They have acrobats, fireworks, a manmade waterfall made from genius and utter ingenuity. I think you will like it."

What he was proposing made Rachel mostly uncomfortable and a bit intrigued. The uncomfortableness came from knowing that she would be going against all of what her parents had drilled into her never to do. But she also felt intrigued. The urge to travel and see far and wide held the implication that she would be exploring new and frightening places, and certainly this Vauxhall could be one of them.

"It does seem very intriguing, My Lord," she replied. "But I will have to think it over. I suppose you like to visit those places? Vauxhall, Drury Lane?"

"And more," he added. "I love the racehorse track at Ascot, I go to the mineral springs at Bath, and I sometimes go to the Cornish Shores. I fence and ride every other morning, and I have some nights at my men's club, White's. I have a highly active life."

Rachel felt a twinge of envy settle on her chest. "That sounds extremely exciting. I was not allowed to ride a horse, not even sidesaddle."

"Never?"

"Not even once," Rachel said as they meandered back to the front walk. "I was not allowed to have a pet, not a puppy or a kitten, not even a bird. I have few friends as my parents are assured they would pull me away from the path they set me on."

She stole a look at him to see if he was getting nervous. Anyone should be terrified of knowing the baggage she came with. But Lord Strathmore looked far from scared...adversely, he looked thrilled. And she wondered why.

Chapter 11

The next evening, while her mother was at church and her father was in London, Rachel was again in the garden, trying to find an explanation—any explanation—of why Lord Strathmore would be happy to be with her.

She could not fathom why a man would want to take her, a woman with little experience in society and who came with a list of preconceptions a mile long. Presumptions that would make her even more of an outcast to the fashionable society and would inevitably stain the person she was with. Why would he want to even court her?

His lifestyle was a full existence away from hers, and she knew nothing of what it was to be as...free and autonomous as he was. She came near to the pagoda in the middle of the garden when the strong crunch of twigs had her turning on the path.

William was striding to her with a look on his face that she had never seen before. His face was set darkly, and it made her take a wary step back. As he came closer, she saw a blistering flame in his eyes that made her take a few more steps back until she was pressed against the pagoda's wall.

His elbows caged her head, and his eyes glowed a smoldering emerald, and before she could say a word—his lips were on hers in a hungry, relentless kiss. He did not ask her to yield to him; he took what he wanted. And Rachel found...she loved it.

His tongue surged through her mouth as if he owned her and his body pressed her tight into the boards behind her. Soon, she felt disoriented

as the hot scintillating, sinful, and exciting sensations unfurled within her.

The tips of her breasts turned taut and throbbing and were chafing of her skin against her chemise. And for the first time, a swathe of gooseflesh ran over every inch of her skin. With her last ounce of willpower, she tore her lips from his to suck in a breath.

Her fingers were clutching his shirt, and the damp air from his pants skittered over her lips. William nudged his nose against hers before kissing her again, a slow, sensual kiss that turned her knees into water while he licked through her mouth.

Bravely, she sucked on his tongue, and William moaned deep in his throat. He pulled away, kissing the curve of her jaw to nibble on her earlobe before he dipped to spread kisses on the hollow of her neck. As he continued to kiss her, he slid his hands from above her to her breast.

The first thumb of his finger across her tight nipple made Rachel cry out a second before clamping her lips between her teeth. Ripples of shock ran through her body like the after-effects from a lightning strike, or the pulse of a strong tide. Though not large, her breasts were firm, and William fitted his left palm over one and squeezed.

She felt liquid heat pool between her thighs and panting. She tried to shut out the feelings. The exquisite pleasure began making her body feel light.

“My God, you are beautiful.” The words sounded torn from him and were guttural. “You are the most beautiful creature ever created on the earth.”

Dazed, she pulled away and licked her lips, and blinked some of the fog from her mind, "I don't think—"

"Yes, you are," William growled, and a shiver ran over her body at the sound. He fondled her breast and Rachel's head grew clouded and grew unfocused again. "I cannot tell you how fiercely I want you."

"W-want me how?"

He kissed her chin. "In every way, darling. In every way, your mind is fascinating to me. Your heart is so pure that I envy you in some ways, and your body calls to me. I know that you are not mine to have, but I still want you."

"I—" She braced her hands on his chest and gently pushed him away. Her eyes searched his, and when she spoke, her voice was hushed. "You have stirred a lot of emotions inside me, William, and in another lifetime, one where I would have the chance to choose my own path in life, I would have happily chosen you. But I cannot."

He pushed away with a huff and turned to sit on the steps of the gazebo. "I know, and I do not trust that Lord Strathmore."

Feeling a little confused, Rachel joined him. "Why? Why are you wary of him?"

William reached over to grasp her hand and held it tightly. "I have no

solid reason, Rachel. It is just my gut feeling that something about him is not right. And I am jealous of him. Jealous that he can be with you when I cannot.”

Leaning onto his shoulder, Rachel sighed. “To be honest, I am wary of him too. I have told him of the many issues I have with my family, how they sheltered me to the point that I feel exorcised from the class I am in and how I have not experienced many things in life.”

He twisted his head to her. “What did he say to that?”

“That he erm...wanted to put me in luxurious clothes, and he hinted that he wanted to take me to see places like Bath and Vauxhall,” Rachel answered.

“Vauxhall?” William quirked a brow. “Are you willing to go there? It’s called a Pleasure Garden for a reason.”

“I know,” Rachel groaned while rubbing her chest. “And you know what is worst? I want to go to places I have never been before, but I’m plagued with the ideas that these places are dens of sin for me.”

William shook his head. “Do you think he is tricking you?”

“Why would he trick me?” Rachel blinked.

His arm looped around her shoulder and pulled her into his side. “Think about it, Rachel. You are the sole daughter of a Duke and the

heir to his fortune. There are a lot of fortune seekers out there. He might be one of them.”

“I do not think so,” Rachel said while training her gaze to the sky. “He is a businessman in the capital and is under contract from the Regent himself. And he has a prosperous Marquisdom. My mother and father are nothing but meticulous when it comes to who they want me to marry. I doubt he would even pass their assessment. They would not even let me see him if he were in debt or if he were a liar.”

His hand slipped to her back and ran over her spine. “If you feel that he is being deceitful, tell your parents.”

Closing her eyes, Rachel shook her head. “He is an interesting man, William, but though he is young and handsome, he is just the sort that my parents want to use. He knows the Regent, and that is what they want him.”

Shifting her to face him, William asked, “Do you want to marry him?”

“I—” she paused. “I do not know yet.”

He cupped her cheek. “I have no power to stop you though I wish I had. All I can tell you is to follow your heart. It will never steer you wrong.”

Twilight had come in full, and the air was hovering in the mystical interim between day and night. William slid his hand into her loose hair, sinking his fingers into her thick tresses and tilting her head to the side. He swept her up into a deep, heated kiss that spoke of

longing and need. His lips worked over hers in seductive dance that she wished would never end.

Oh, heavens. I never thought a kiss could be like this.

He pulled away and swept his thumb over her swollen bottom lip. "You are gorgeous, sweetling. Do not let anyone tell you or show you differently."

Daring to land a soft kiss on his cheek, Rachel pulled away from him. "Good night, William."

"You too, sweet."

With regret, Rachel left for the house and drifted to her room in a haze of wonder. She entered the room to see the windows closed, drapes drawn, and Jane stoking the fire. Unladylike, she plunked herself into a chair and dropped her hands on her lap.

She dared not touch her lips or her cheek or her neck because the ghostly sensations of William's kisses lingered there. She blinked. She might be a virgin, but she certainly was not a fool, and her insides grew hot at the notion of what he would do to her if she were free to be with him.

William was a tender soul, a bit haunted, but he was a lovely man. He was brilliant, sensitive, and kind. He had been given a bad hand in life, but he was making the most of it. She loved the way his eyes landed on her with the utmost care and consideration and now desire.

A tendril of warmth snaked through her heart at the memory of how he had so accurately found out how she wanted to be free of the chains her family was putting on her. A soft shiver ran through her at the memory of the times he had held her hands, hugged her close and kissed her.

Lately, it had felt odd to her how dearly she anticipated seeing him in the library and the peaceful session she sat through with him. How she pretended not to see the tender looks and secret smiles he aimed at her over the easel but had recorded all of them in her heart.

Clarity struck her. She might not know what it was to love someone intimately, but she defied anyone to tell her that she was not getting close.

It was only when Jane whisper-shouted her first name that Rachel realized she had drifted off. She looked up at the maid's concerned look.

"I've been calling you for a while," Jane said. "Are you all right?"

"I...I think I have feelings for William." Her hands closed roughly on her skirts. "I think I may love him."

It took all Rachel's strength to keep her expression neutral while William sketched her the next morning. Now, with her realization

about how she was beginning to feel for him, every pass of his eyes made her stomach tighten and her skin prickle with awareness.

She had to fight even harder when her mother unexpectedly came in to watch the session for a while before she announced that Lord Strathmore would be calling on her later that day.

Instantly, her eyes flew to William, who had not gone as tense as she anticipated. Thankfully, Lady Mary had not caught on to the motion and continued. "Miss Colton, please assure that my daughter wears a good dress. We want her to make an even better impression than yesterday."

Rachel grew cross. The nonchalant way her mother spoke made her seem as if she were only a commodity to be traded.

Or a prized sheep up for the slaughter.

She then went to William's side and looked over the paper with a shrewd eye. Her lips flattened while looking back at Rachel reclining on her chaise.

"Are you sure this is the right appealing background for her, Mr. Smith?"

"Not entirely," William said. "But it is an attempt. We do have another location, and then we will have three images to choose from."

Lady Mary's lips pursed. "Fine. Continue with this one and then the next. We will choose the best then. How long do you think you will take to finish this one?"

"Only a few more days," William said. "Then we can move to the garden."

"Yes, Your Grace," he said.

With a curt nod, her mother left the room, but the tension Rachel had expected to dissipate only grew tighter. She was not sure how she felt knowing that the Lord was coming around while she was feeling that way about William.

But maybe it was a good thing that the Lord was going to be there. She could prod a little more into why he genuinely wanted to be with her while, in her limited experience, many others did not.

William did not look discomfited by her mother's actions, and she kept wondering why he did not feel as irritated and displaced as she was. Rachel kept quiet for the rest of the setting, trying to create a few pointed questions that might point her in the way of finding out what Lord Strathmore was after.

When William dropped his pencils and reached for his towel, he said, "I think that might do it this morning."

As she moved the blanket from her legs and stood, Rachel asked Jane to leave them for a moment and, when her maid left the room, went to William. His eyelids were lowered down to his set of folios while

she reached over to touch his face.

Looking up, she had more room to cup his cheek and felt a prickle of his beard coming in. His gaze was guarded when he met her eyes but softened a little.

“Please do not worry too much about it,” she said. “He will not try anything with me.”

“I hope not,” he said, while twisting his face to kiss her palm. “Dare I wish that you enjoy yourself?”

“You may,” Rachel said while tipping on her toes to kiss his cheek. “But I probably will not.”

His lips cracked a grin. “I can only hope. If your parents are out this evening again, meet me in the garden?”

“I will try,” Rachel promised before leaving the room.

It probably was too much to hope for to see William again that evening, but Rachel wanted it. All she had to do was to see her hour or so with Lord Strathmore through and hope her parents would be out again. It was not likely, but she could hope.

Instead of another stroll outside, Rachel found herself in the drawing-room, dressed in a dark emerald gown that was not as severely outdated as the others. It had long sleeves, but the neckline was square and not buttoned up to her neck. Her hair was down in ringlets and secured with simple ivory combs.

Lord Strathmore bowed, and Rachel noted a dandy bright blue embroidered waistcoat that matched his eyes. She stood and curtsied with a welcoming smile. "Good afternoon, My Lord. How are you?"

"Better now that I see you," he took her hand and kissed the back of it. "You are more radiant than I have ever seen you."

Privately, Rachel believed that he was laying on the flattery a bit thick, but she could not mention it. She wanted him to be at ease with her enough that he would admit, if inadvertently, why he was courting her.

"Thank you, My Lord, and you are looking a bit dashing too," she complimented. "I wanted to ask you about Vauxhall. What is your favorite part of the gardens, and where do you think I would be best suited to go?"

He sat with a contemplative look. "I think the Chinese Pavillion is my favorite, but for you, My Lady, I would take you to the Rotunda. It is a glorious hall where you can dance to your heart's content. 'Tis the best place to see others and be seen. And you, of course, would be stunning with the lovely silks I would have you dressed in."

A soft suspicion planted itself in her mind. Again, he had mentioned silks; why was he so caught up in her appearance that he was fixed on

changing her wardrobe?

“I do think that we might take a daring jaunt to the east, the wild lands of India where the majestic Maharaja’s rule, and further into the territory of the Chinese,” Lord Strathmore added. “We could travel the world. The East, New Holland even, and when the continent is calmer from Napoleon’s madness, we can take a journey to France.”

The hint about travelling did make Rachel’s heart leap. For years she had imagined what it would be to travel to different places and possibly overseas lands, but since her parents had crushed those dreams, she had given up on it. But now that she about the marry, the dream sprung up.

“A sea voyage,” she sighed dreamily. “I have always wanted to sail away to hidden lands.”

“I would love to take you anywhere you want to go,” the Lord promised.

Rachel paused as a maid came in with a tray of foods to nibble on. When she left the room, she asked, “Have you courted before?”

“Twice,” he said while she poured out two glasses of lemonade. “Both ladies were too...erm, tenacious and spirited for me to handle. I do not know what featherbrained idea Mary Wollstonecraft, Elizabeth Fry, and Jeanne Baré have given these women, but I will not stand for it.”

While familiar with the first two women he had mentioned, Rachel

knew nothing about the last. "Pardon me, who is Miss Baré?"

"A trickster calling herself Jean Baret, who disguised herself a man to sail with other men in France's colonial expedition," he almost sneered. "How could one think of such a thing?"

From what she knew about the first two - women who were activists and who pushed women's rights - she assumed that the last lady had broken another rule that men believed their gender should not. He was a traditionalist then, believing that women only had their place in the home. Just like her father.

Another point why her parents favored him was the very same point that made her begin to draw away. Was that why he wanted her in silks? To dress her up as the paragon of a London socialite woman and make her into the diamond of the first water? To have her and parade her around as an ornament on his arm? Did he want only a decoration or a woman of substance?

She sipped her drink just to give her some time to think. "Would you tell me about your family? Father, Mother, any siblings?"

He launched into a spiel about his family, about his grandfather and father who were academics and brilliant lords, and diverted to his uncle who was a member of the Royal Society. It took him a long while to get to his mother and his sister, who he briefly mentioned were good quiet women. His mother, the daughter of a late Earl, and a sister, who was off at finishing school somewhere in Manchester.

She nibbled on a buttered crouton while he went back to his father and uncle, expressing how he wanted to not only match them in wealth and prosperity but to surpass them.

Rachel sighed and began to half-listen to him with her mind flitting to an image of William's burning emerald eyes just before he had kissed with more passion than she had ever imagined existed.

"Lady Hampton?"

She snapped out of her daze and instantly reddened at the searching look the Lord was giving her. "I'm sorry. I did not mean to stray off. I was—was just thinking about a sermon at the church the other day. Very strange, I know."

"No, it is not," he said. "Not to me. Tell me, what was the sermon about?"

"How women should defer to their husbands at all times," Rachel said while closely watching the Lord. "It was about humility and obedience."

His chin notched up. "Ah, yes, a sermon about the proper way. Women should heed to their superiors, yes."

Rachel sat stunned. She reached for her glass to mask her shock. He wanted her to be a submissive wife, a lady he could dress up and put on display at his whim. Knowing the family she came from, she would not be one to disobey him or object to him. He did not want to know her, he did not want to love her, and he did not want to listen to any concerns she would have. She would not be tenacious or spirited but rather a marionette.

A part of her wanted to cry, but another part of her was relieved. Now she knew why he had picked her from the rest of the ladies in the ball and why he was so ardent in pursuing her.

If only I could tell him to leave.

But she could not; her parents would never let her hear the end of it. They wanted her to marry him and would never let her reject him because, as she had asked for, he was younger. They would allow her that, but they would never let her reject him for his archaic beliefs and his connection to the capital. Which was what they wanted.

“I see,” she muttered, and before he could ask her about her tone, she pressed. “Do you appreciate art, My Lord?”

Rachel escaped to the garden at twilight as if the hounds of hell were nipping at her heels. She needed William—his warm embrace, his kind words, and his caring eyes. She scanned the first section of the garden and did not find him, and her body spun, trying to find him anywhere.

She nearly teetered on her feet—only to have strong arms grab her and lift her. She smelled the familiar scent of William’s skin and buried her head under his chin as he carried her away. She was not sure where he had taken her, but when she spotted the eaves of the gazebo she realized where she was.

He sat and resting on his lap, Rachel nearly cried. “He does not want me, William. Not for me as myself. He wants a puppet who he can order around, pull my strings, and make me dance to his will. And the worst thing is, my parents will force me to marry him because he is exactly what they need. I—I cannot. I cannot go on, William. He will choke the little life I have struggled so hard to keep alive.”

Softly, William murmured comforting words in her ears while he dropped tender kisses on her hairline. “I am sorry, sweetheart.”

The floodgates Rachel had held back burst, and the tears flowed down her cheeks. “T-they never gave me a chance, William. Th-they never put me in a place where I—I could choose for myself. They n-never put me on even footing with the others, and n-now they have trapped me in a box.”

His grip on her shoulder tightened, and she felt his lips rest just against her ear. He did not say anything, but his warmth and comfort began to soothe her. When she had cried herself out, Edward’s lips kissed the tear marks on her cheeks away.

Rachel closed her eyes. “How am I going to survive, William?”

Chapter 12

“You will sweetling,” William said, and regret and sorrow were thick in his tone. “You are strong; I know you will.”

“But there comes a point where someone’s strength will give out,” Rachel whispered. “I have tried so long and so hard not to be as lifeless as my parents are. And now, if I am to marry this man, my soul will die too. My parents will force the union, I know.”

“Is there anyway you could refuse the marriage?” he asked.

She shook her head. “No. Not until I am dead.”

William moved to speak, but he closed his mouth soon after. Rachel wondered what he was going to say but did not ask. Instead, she just lay against him and held unto the comfort he was giving her. The small kisses on her skin, the warm stroke of his hand down her back, and the comforting hum deep his throat.

Deciding to ignore the worries that were heavy on her heart, Rachel allowed herself to imagine that all of those troubles did not exist and that she was not teetering on the brink of disaster. Instead, she was in a hidden land, just alone with a man she was beginning to love and was wrapped in a cocoon of comfort.

“I wish this was a night terror that I could wake up from,” she murmured. “This was all a dream.”

“I know,” he said against her temple. “I know. This situation shouldn’t be happening to you. You have the softest of hearts and to bruise you again like this is utterly cruel.”

“My parents claim to be pious, but they are pitiless,” she shook her head. “I do not see how both can connect.”

“Some who think they are good people are only good in their eyes,” William said cautiously. “Whilst those on the outside see differently.”

“I wish I could be like the rainbirds in the drawing you showed me once,” Rachel said. “That I had a birds’ wings so I could fly away from all this upset.”

Again, he attempted to say something, but he stopped himself and shook his head. “I wish I could tell you something that would put your mind at ease, but I cannot.”

Soon after he uttered those words, he leaned over and kissed her tenderly on the forehead. Since the night they had first kissed, these moments of gentle affection that she treasured had become a part of their ever-growing relationship, of their deepening bond.

She tilted her head up and placed a soft, tender kiss on his lips. William brushed under her eyes, marking the path of her tears. It was as if he were apologizing for something he had not caused. His tenderness and care were like a soothing balm on her stinging, smarting heart.

Pulling away, Rachel dabbed the back of her hand to her eyes. "I should go inside. And I will see you on the morrow."

"Yes," he nodded. "Good night."

She stood in her place for a moment, as she felt the strange sensation that he would add something, but when nothing more came from him, she smiled and headed back to the house.

It cut William deeply that he could not give Rachel more comfort, but his hands were tied. In a perfect world, he would be the one courting her. He would be the one not having to hide his affection for her. He would be the one to give her mind some ease. But he was only a servant, and she was in a class that both fascinated and repulsed him.

He viewed the peerage as a strange section of mankind; observing their strange rituals and actions from the sidelines but wanting nothing to do with them. He did not understand their hate and discrimination against those of the so-called lower class. But William had found people of that class, who were kinder, more generous, and had more love and care in their hearts than those whose names were written on Debretts.

He knew Rachel had spotted the times he had almost spoken with the very ludicrous proposition that she run away. But he could never say them. where would she go? What would a gentlewoman like her do on her own? She had never known hardship or poverty or homelessness as he had. Her skin was not as thick as his.

With a sigh, William stood and went back to the house that was as vast and empty and the Duke and Duchess's hearts.

If they were going to use their only child as a pawn, they are heartless savages.

He entered his room, bypassing the servant's meal-hall as hunger was the furthest thing from his mind. He went directly to his desk, where his personal drawings of Rachel rested, and pulled out one of his few empty sheets.

He drew the most heartbreaking image of her, manipulating her body into that of a fountain with her head tilted up. And pouring from her closed eyes were streams of tears.

Dropping the pencil, he gripped his head at the feel of the incoming headache. The dull throb in his temple told him that he would not be sleeping that night, and William left to the dining hall to get a pitcher of water to serve him the night and as he was going to need it.

Halfway through the night, while he pressed a damp cloth to his temple and sat near the window to get the cool air. The lands beyond this home were large and extensive, and William sardonically noted that the square of the garden below him, including the maze just beyond, could have comfortably housed ten families he had seen in the slums in London.

The rich only care about getting richer. I am surprised that Rachel has seen it and even more that she hates it.

He managed to doze a little before dawn and woke up just as the sun was rising. His headache was a soft thrum at the base of his head, which William was thankful for as he washed and dressed.

Is Rachel going to talk to her parents about Strathmore?

After a light morning meal, he arrived at the library to see Miss Colton pacing anxiously. That did not bode well.

“Good morning, Miss Colton,” he bowed. “Is Lady Hampton well th—”

The stinging sound of a *slap* just beyond the door had him spinning on his heel and racing out to see Rachel slumping on a wall while her mother walked away. Rage flew into his head, making his vision flash red and black, and he nearly lurched at the woman, but Rachel’s choked cry had him stopping and turning back to her.

He slid a hand under her back and braced her shoulder on his to give him room to guide her into the library gently. Her left cheek was already starting to turn a mottled red bruise, and his heart burned with grief and anger for her.

She did not deserve this. No one did.

Crouching at her knees, he gently peeled her hand away from her cheek and stared with numb disbelief that her own mother had slapped her hard enough for bruises to start.

“Miss Colton, please fetch a cold cloth for Lady Hampton, please,” he requested. “The colder, the better.”

“Yes, Mister Smith,” the maid hurried out of the room.

Taking her hand, he kissed her knuckles. “What happened, sweetling? Why would your mother hurt you?”

“I told her that I do not want to have any more contact with Lord Strathmore,” Rachel said hollowly. “She did not take it well.”

William lifted his hand but stopped inches from her cheek. He wanted to touch her but not if it would give her any pain. “God knows Rachel, I would take you away from this if I could.”

Tears began beading in her eyes. “I know.”

Instead of touching her cheek, he took her hand and kissed her knuckles. “You deserve so much more than this.”

Her opposite hand framed his cheek and her fingers traced over his cheekbone. “You were Galahad in your first life, weren’t you?”

His heart ached. Her struggles and pain drew forth a surge of tenderness in him. Never had he experienced this desire to soothe a woman, comfort her, and protect her from all that would harm her.

William did not have to question the emotion turning his heart into liquid or the fire resting in his belly—he had fallen in love with Rachel.

“I am hardly that pure, sweetheart.”

Shaking her head, she said, “Why is it that you seem to understand me more than anyone dares to...more than I seem to understand myself?”

Because you're mine. The possessive certainty gripped him and rang true in his soul though he could not fathom how to make it so. He leaned his head into her hand and tried to battle the feeling to either stalk down the corridor, find the Duchess and berate her, or smuggle Rachel out of the home.

But to where?

The tender moment was broken when the door to the room opened, and the maid came in, holding a water basin and some cloths stuck under her arm. This was the first time their relationship had been shown to anyone else, and while it was inevitable that it would be revealed, he had not planned for Miss Colton to find out yet.

Nevertheless, William pulled away from Rachel and allowed Miss Colton to tend to her mistress. While he pretended to look along the shelves, his inner soul seethed. Rachel had told him that her parents were relentless, but he had not thought he would ever see it.

And he knew that what she had said was true—she would never survive being married to that man. Especially as her parents were still

going to ingrate themselves into her marriage and pull their strings as if they were puppets.

But how can she get away from here and not suffer? I do not think her parents would be forgiving enough to send her help.

He could hear hushed whispers passing between Rachel and Miss Colton but did not push himself to listen in to what they were saying. If they were whispering, there was a reason behind it, so he left them to their privacy.

It was difficult to believe that their session would continue. With how injured Rachel was, he could only see her going to the room to lie down but when Rachel called to him telling him that she was ready for her session, his jaw dropped.

“Are you sure?” he asked.

“Yes,” Rachel said as she thumbed the book on her lap. “Please, continue.”

Days bled into a sennight, and aside from their sessions, William had barely seen Rachel in those days. She was always out in London or church or forced to endure Lord Strathmore's visits. They were close to finishing her drawing in the library, and then they would move to the garden.

She was quiet on the state of courtship with Lord Strathmore, but by how wan she grew every day, he knew that it was not going well. He hated it that he could not help her because as soon as his task was done at the home, he was going to be on the move again.

And that only made a sinking sensation of guilt turn his stomach. He should have never initiated intimacy while knowing that it could never be permanent. The pain he felt knowing that Rachel was growing unhappy and that there was nothing he could do about it, whilst knowing that he was in love with her, had his heart in loops of sorrow, agony, and remorse.

He had to apologize to her as soon as he could and hurry with the last portrait so that he could put the brush to oils and run. It was terrifying how much he cared for Rachel and what was more frightening was the nights he spent awake, daydreaming about how it would be if he and Rachel were together.

Sadly, those dreams did not dissipate at daylight.

He could barely separate his dreams of seeing Rachel happy with the reality of her looking as if she were nearing the end of the world. She was quiet, hardly saying a word during the hours she spent sitting for him, and the few times he eked some words from her, they were stiff and brittle. It was as if she would shatter in half if she spoke to him.

Now, William had enough. He had to speak to her and get her to tell him why she could not look him in the eye. That evening as the rains battered the house and streamed like rivers down the windows, he found her curled up in an armchair in the library.

A roaring fire was in the grate, and she was dressed in that horrid shapeless nightgown and wrapped with a book on her lap. Her head snapped up as he closed the door behind him and stalked to her where she sat.

She was jittery, fidgeting hard enough for the book to slip through her grasp. The thud on the floor sounded like a gong and her eyes did not move from him as he approached her. William kneeled and picked the hardback before placing it on the end table before her.

He picked up a few minute trembles and smiled because she was gazing at him as if he were the only thing that existed in the world. His eyes dipped to her bottom lip that was trapped in her teeth before he went back to meet her eyes and the plainly vulnerable glimmer that lingered there.

His hand snaked out and cupped her chin. God above, he was attracted to her for reason she did not dare name or number. Rachel had artless beauty, untouched by the pounds of cosmetics so many ladies used to enhance their appearance. She had an endearing naiveté that was so rare, and she had a verve for life he hoped that had not been squashed out by her horrid parents.

His fingers tingled where he touched her, and the vulnerability faded, and she grew worried as if she were not sure the attraction he knew she felt was mutual. He understood because they had been separated for days, but she was wrong. He used his thumb to pull her lip from between her teeth.

All of it, her hesitancy, and her attraction were like setting a match to the powder keg of his suppressed desires. He lowered his head with infinite slowness and touched his cool closed lips to hers.

The tremble he had hoped to feel from her shivered through her body as the tip of his tongue teased along the seam of her lips. When she opened to him, his tongue ran through her mouth in sweeps of moist heat. She arched her body toward him.

He played with her lips and pleased her until a trembling moan rose from her throat. He calmed his lust with tender caresses that made the lonely space around his heart swell with pleasure and satisfaction. She tasted sweet, and he tasted honey on the tongue.

He pulled away and lifted her from the chair and sat instead and pulled her down on his lap. A warning that they might get discovered and disaster would follow, but he could not care. Smoothing her hair from her shoulder, he brushed the tender skin of her throat with open-mouthed kisses and tender bites. He was careful not to mark her skin red, but he craved to taste her.

Gooseflesh pricked her skin in large strips. She threw her head back, giving him access to her vulnerable flesh, and he dined. Her fingers dug into his hair and gripped him with trembling fingers.

His mouth broke from hers. "My God, this is madness, but I've waited so long to taste you again." He dropped his hands from her quivering body. "I have missed you, Rachel."

Her body was quivering with stiff, static energy, and before she crumpled into pieces, she melted and sagged into him. "I'm sorry."

Stroking her back, William asked, "About what, sweet?"

“For avoiding you,” she mentioned. “Because I was, *I am*, scared.”

“Of what?”

Pulling away, William saw rife terror in her eyes. “I am scared about how I feel about you.”

Smoothing her hair from her face, William asked, “What are you feeling?”

“I—” She paused, and her face contorted into pain. “I cannot express it.”

He took her into his arms, pressed his mouth against her hair in a gentle and loving motion. “Perhaps I can tell you what I feel. From the start, the very beginning, when I saw you, you have captivated me, and I feel overcome by you. Your spirit is indomitable, your beauty is otherworldly, and your courage inspires me. I am starting to fall in love with you, Rachel, and it scares me.”

“It scares me too,” she replied. “I never thought you felt the same.”

“I do not kiss women to play games with their hearts,” William replied. “But I admit I made a mistake. I should not have kissed you because there is no option for you and me to be together. You will be married off soon, and as soon as I finish the painting, I am off to another house, darling. I have no place to rest my head.”

“We are to part ways, I know,” she said while resting her head on his shoulder. “But I wish you would not. I am terrified of so many things, William. I fear getting married to a man who will only be a tool in my parents’ arsenal. And I was scared to admit that I care for you more than I should. I could barely sleep at night.”

“You haunt my dreams,” William kissed the top of her head. “I have not fallen in love with a woman before. I have been smitten, and yes, I have been with women before but never have I felt as if my heart would leave my body if anything happened to you. And I can only think why. You have captivated my mind.”

“I am terrified to love you when I know nothing can come from it,” Rachel replied. “I feel as if I am being foolish. Why hope for something that I cannot gain?”

“Sadly, logic does not match with emotions,” William said. “It is a battle that I have jousting in for some long nights.”

“I’m glad you came to talk to me,” Rachel said quietly. “At least, if I do get married off, I will have these memories to hold dear.”

William wanted to object, but he could not. She was right—he would hold the remembrances dear.

“You have had a hard day,” William said. He cradled her face in his hands and kissed her forehead, her eyelids, her cheeks. “For as long I am here, you are not alone. I will be here and help you as long as I can.”

“Thank you.” Rachel leaned into his chest and inhaled his smell, an earthy mixture of plain soap and citrus.

Tilting her head upward, he looked straight into her intense blue eyes and was lost in the deep, tender gaze. “I am here for you, sweetling.

He gave into his constant craving and kissed her. Their mouths fused, his tongue delving into sweet lips. When she shyly sucked on his tongue, he felt that a jolt all down to his groin. Rachel pulled away a little and smiled.

“I have to go rest,” she said. “Now that I know you feel the same way I do, I can sleep.”

Laughing, William said, “I am glad that I could help.”

Her hand slipped from his in a sinuous slide, and he watched as she left the library. Sagging into the seat, he rubbed his face and then adjusted himself in his trousers. His smalls were tight under his trousers, and he ached to relieve himself.

Heaving himself up from the seat, he left the library to his room and got to his room. Closing the door, he shed his clothes and sank to his bed only in his smalls. He knew a dream about Rachel was imminent and for the first time in days, and now knowing that she felt the same way he did, William did not fear what he would dream. He welcomed it.

Chapter 13

“My Lady,” Jane whispered in fear. “Where were you? It is past midnight!”

Looking at her maid with a lighter heart than she had felt in days, Rachel smiled as she moved to her bed. “Do not worry, Jane. I am fine.”

“I can see that, but what took you so long?” Jane pressed.

“I was speaking to William,” she responded while slipping under the covers. “I realized that I have been avoiding him for nothing. I was scared of admitting my feelings to him or even looking at him for fear that he would see through me. To my shock—he feels the same.”

Jane perched on the edge of her bed. “He feels the same? As in—?”

“He cares for me, just as I care for him,” Rachel said while being careful not to utter the love word. “He is a gentle, loving, and understanding man, Jane. If my life had been different and I would have met him some other ways, I would have chosen him to marry.”

“I—” Jane shook her head. “I am stunned. But since you mentioned marriage, what are you going to do? Lord Strathmore is going to be your husband soon. Isn’t he?”

The lightened emotions in her heart shrunk and shriveled into nothing. The fantasy that she had allowed herself to live just minutes ago was now nothing but a puff of smoke. The reality that she was going to marry a man she did not like was now as heavy as a boulder on her heart.

“Please do not remind me,” she sighed. “I want to dream just a little more.”

Jane shook her head. “I do hope that you know what you are doing, My Lady. This seems as if you are playing with fire.”

“If I marry that man, I am already burned,” Rachel muttered while turning away. “I would like to live a little freedom while I can.”

The darkness of the room she was in had icy terror sinking into her soul, and a dank air filled her lungs while she struggled against the bonds that bound her hands over her head.

A wicked, devious laugh had her heart pounding out of rhythm. “Do you think you could ever escape me?”

“Who—” She wetted her lips. “Who are you?”

The form emerged from the darkness, and it was that of Lord Strathmore. His fair coloring was twisted with hate into something she

could barely recognize.

“Stop struggling,” he sneered. “You are wasting your time. ‘Tis useless because you cannot escape me,” he said.

“Release me.” Her wrists felt raw against the rough rope that tied her, and she tried not to shiver at the coldness that seeped through her clothes. The fear that she was naked clamped her heart tight. For once, she looked down and realized that her body was not unclothed, but instead of her cotton nightgown and sensible wrapper, she was clad in beautiful silk nothings.

“Where are my clothes!”

“Those unsightly things? I burned them. You needn’t have them anymore.” It was dim, but she saw when he flicked out a scroll, the writing on it as sinister as his sneer. At the end, she saw her name scribbled down as if she signed herself over to him.

“We are married now,” the Marquess grinned wolfishly. “You are mine.”

“I sold myself to you?” She gasped. “How can that be? I told my parents that I want nothing to do with you!”

He leaned in with a wicked grin. “Your parents had no such constraints. They gave you over to me. I own you now, so be a good little girl and submit to me. Aren’t your clothes glorious?”

“You enslaved me with silks,” Rachel felt her stomach sink.

“And satins,” he leered. “As I promised.”

Coiling in repulsion, Rachel nearly screamed. “Let me go. I do not want to be with you.”

He leaned in and cupped her breast. “Are you thinking about that riff-raff painter you thought you would be with? *Him?*”

“Yes, release me!”

“He is a pauper and will never do good by you,” the Marquess sneered. “Are you a glutton for punishment? He will make you work for scraps of bread.”

“But he loves me. I would rather that than be bound with jewels, silks and bon-bons,” Rachel said.

His laugh was mocking and scornful. “Foolish girl. I will teach you that love is worth nothing. I am and will be your future, to the day you die!”

She tugged her wrists again to find that the rope had turned into iron manacles, clamping down on her soft flesh. Strathmore grinned. “No knight in shining armor is going to come for you. You. Are. Mine!”

Rachel jerked awake with a terrified gasp. Her heart was thumping out of rhythm, and as soon as she got her bearings together, she checked her body. No silk dress, no rope, and no manacles.

Slumping back to the pillows with relief, Rachel realized the precarious position she was in. The Marquess had not proposed marriage to her yet, but it was inevitable. Any day now, the ax would drop, and she would be tied to the man she was dying to get away from.

She gazed with dulled eyes at the plain walls of her bedroom and the simple eye-let curtains resting against the closed windows. With a stark jab of clarity, Rachel realized how contrary she was. When she had wanted silks, they had been withheld from her, and now that they were being offered, she wanted nothing to do with it.

As she sat up and fixed the pillows behind her, she had the pressing urge to find William and just sink into his arms. She wanted to hide away from the reality that was soon to come upon her.

But how long would I be able to hide?

Slipping out of her bed, she padded to her washstand in the annex room and washed her face and mouth before donning her wrapper and her slippers. She left the room through one of the many side doors she used to get to the garden.

The rains had left the walkways wet and slippery, but she inched her way to the gazebo. She sat behind a thicket of shrub that hid her from the main house and gave her some privacy. Her eyes landed on the

steps where William had kissed her, and she warmed.

As her dratted luck would have it, she had found her heart's desire at long last, only not to be able to have it. It was so easy to think that fate was plotting against her, tipping over any chance she had to find happiness and love. The dream about Strathmore still rested heavily on her mind and dragged a sigh from her.

Curling into herself, Rachel wrapped an arm around her knees.

"Are you cold?" William asked.

She lifted her head and gave him a wan smile. "No...how did you find me here?"

"My room has a perfect view of the garden," he gestured to the house behind them. "Remember? I saw you and Lord Strathmore once."

"Oh yes," she laughed. "He said that you were glaring at him. I pretended not to notice. But why were you glaring?"

He sat near her, and she realized that his shirt had deep vee cut in the middle. It gave her an enticing glimpse of a strong chest dusted over with dark hair.

She blinked. "Are you in your sleeping shirt?"

“Yes,” he shrugged, then pointedly mentioned. “Does it matter? You are in your nightdress and a wrapper.”

Laughing, Rachel rested her head on his shoulder only to have him shift and place her head on his collarbone instead while wrapping an arm around her. “I was glaring because I did not want him touching you at all.”

“But that was—”

“Before I realized what you meant to me?” He asked. “Yes, it was, but I told you, sweet, logic does not match up with emotions. My heart knew that I wanted and desired you long before my mind realized it.”

“I had a horrible dream,” Rachel admitted. “Strathmore had trapped me as his wife, chaining me down in a silk dress.”

He kissed her temple. “You deserve silks.”

“Once upon a time, I would have given in to have the luxury he is dangling in front of my face,” Rachel admitted. “But not now. Not when I know that I have someone who cares for me. I would not trade that for anything. Not for lavish clothes or diamonds, or trips around the world.”

“You would give up on living in luxury?” He asked.

“Money does not give one peace of mind,” Rachel said. “I know, I have loved it from the day I was born, and little do I know true comfort.”

“That is utterly heartbreaking to hear,” he murmured in her ear.

Shrugging, Rachel held tight to him. “And I would not have known much of the difference if you had not walked into my life.”

“I do not know if I should be proud or broken by that,” William replied. “I’m glad that you know that you need a man who understands who you are and that you want love and acceptance instead of pomp and power. I want to want to give you what you want, but I cannot, and that cuts me deeply.”

“I’m sorry.”

Kissing her cheek, he said, “You have nothing to be sorry about. You had not chosen the life you were given and nor did I.”

“I keep dreaming about another existence where we had met in different circumstances,” Rachel said. “It does not matter if I were a princess trapped in a castle and you came to rescue me or if I were a milkmaid and you were a stable hand. All that matters was that we were free to be together.”

“What a fanciful mind you have,” William laughed as the sun began to break through the grey clouds. “I have dreamed about us as well, but nothing so tame.”

A spike of arousal ran through her chest, "What was it then?"

He leaned in to kiss just under her ear. "If I told you, you would be scandalized. The things I want to do to you, to your body, will turn your soul red. It is that wicked."

"How wicked?" She dared asked.

"I won't tell you," he replied. "It's rather scandalous."

Leaning in, Rachel rested a hand on his knee. Peering at him with a plea in her eyes, she asked, "Please tell me, scandalous or not."

He gave her a long assessing look before whispering, "I want to have you in my bed and kiss your body until you are whimpering under me," he stroked her cheek. "And I want to part your legs and drink from your nectar."

His words had her body flashing hot and cold. She reached out and found that her fingers were trembling. Gripping his shirt, she asked, "You can do that?"

"And more," he whispered while pulling away. His eyes were smoldering, and the image of him kissing her there made her pulse race. "You should go in, sweetheart. I want to have a few more weeks with you, and if your parents discover me with you here, I will not be able to."

Touching his face, Rachel smiled. "I want that too."

She left the gazebo with a final touch and headed to the house, only to pause at the door and look over her shoulder. He was out of sight, but she could still feel his presence with her. Entering the house, she made it to her rooms without discovery.

She knew that her luck about meeting William so many times without discovery would soon run out. One day one of the gardeners or a stray maid would spot them and go tattle about it to her parents. She had to keep their secret interactions to a minimum.

She spotted the drapes of her bed down and sighed; Jane had put them down and had lied to her mother again. A twinge of guilt cut through her at knowing that she was forcing Jane to lie. She pulled the drapes away and tied them to the posts, and while she was doing it, Jane came in.

"Oh, good," she sighed. "You are back."

"I am," Rachel said. "And I am sorry for putting you in a position to deceive my mother for me."

Giving her an appreciative smile, Jane nodded. "I realize. But you must realize by now that you cannot keep running off to the meet Mister Smith on a whim."

"I did not go to meet him," Rachel tightened the strap of her wrapper.

“He found me out here, and we only spoke for a while. I told him about my fear of marrying Strathmore.”

“And what did he say?”

Dipping her eyes, Rachel shook her head. “It does not matter. Would you prepare my bath and then have my morning meal sent up?”

“Yes, My Lady,” Jane nodded, taking Rachel’s diversion from the topic as the hint not to prod.

When Jane left the room, Rachel thought of the wicked kiss William dreamed about having with her. Her breath caught again. No one but she had touched herself there, and to have him kiss her there as he did her mouth made her want to melt.

“William...” she sighed breathily. “What are you doing to me?”

Thank goodness that he had brought his drawing materials with him because as he sat there, with the papers on his lap, not one of the gardeners gave him a second glance. He was not doodling flowers or trees, but his vision of what Rachel would look like in the throes of pleasure.

They had not done more than kiss, and though their kisses were hot and scintillating, he wanted more. He wanted to touch her, lick her

warm skin and yes, prop her legs over his shoulders and kiss her intimately.

“Mister Smith,” Lady Hurstmere said as she rounded the gazebo. It was the first time he had seen her in the morning, and he thanked good sense that Rachel had left the garden almost a half-hour ago. The Duchess was holding an armful of cut roses, and in her other hand was a small shear. “Good morning. Are you out here frequently?”

Casually closing the folio, he nodded. “Yes. Your garden is a muse to me.”

“I am pleased to hear that,” the Duchess nodded tersely. “I must ask, how long do you think you will take for the last drawing, which I assume is going to be somewhere inside here, correct?”

“Yes,” William nodded. “In this gazebo in fact. It is near enough to the flowers to give her a good surrounding, and she will not have to worry about her dress being dirtied.”

“Yes, yes, but how long?” she pressed.

He refrained from narrowing his eyes. “I would suppose the same time as the last two. Two weeks or less. Why?”

“Because we want to engage my daughter to Lord Strathmore before the month is done.”

After a quick calculation, William stopped himself from gaping. “You are going to give your daughter away in fifteen days?”

“Yes.” She cocked her head to the side. “I hope so. In fifteen days, she will be engaged. Why?”

He cleared his throat from the harsh tone that was brewing in his heart. “Have you told Lady Hampton, Your Grace? I am sure she would have some concerns about it being so quick.”

The Duchess laughed. “She will accept it as she has accepted all the decisions that we have made for her in her life. She is young and foolish, Mister Smith. She needs a strong hand in her life to keep her on the straight and narrow path, and Lord Strathmore is the one.”

The blistering need to shout that Rachel hated the very air the lord breathed was bubbling inside his heart. The Duchess must have seen the notion on his face as she gave him a pointed look, daring him to speak what was on his mind. He clamped his lips shut because even though she was daring him, he knew he was walking into a trap.

He traded the need to be with Rachel for two more weeks in favor of telling the woman how evil and despicable she was.

Forcing a smile on his face, he nodded. “I understand, Your Grace, and I will do my best to keep to your timing. But the painting is a delicate procedure. It cannot be rushed.”

“However long it is, my daughter will have her engagement,” she smiled rather nastily. “I know you are a prudent man, Mister Smith.

Even if you do not do it in time, count it as a wedding gift.”

Taking her bouquet of roses, she walked back to the house while William stared at her back. He wrenched his tight jaw open only to sag on the wooden bench. Any hope he had to be with Rachel began to die before his eyes.

Chapter 14

With a light step, Rachel went into the library to see William there, gazing out the window with an empty look on his face. She stopped short in her. Never before had she seen William with such a downcast, worried, dark, tumultuous look, and instantly she grew concerned.

After casting a nervous look over her shoulder and seeing no one there, she went to his side. "William? What is the matter?"

He turned to her and quickly masked his expression with a pretend smile. "Nothing."

Her eyes skipped over his face, noting the tightness that still lingered there. "I can see that something is bothering you. What is it? What changed from this morning?"

He rubbed a hand over his face. "I'm sorry; I should have told you but our conversation this morning took precedence. I had not slept last night, and I am feeling a bit off now."

"Oh," Rachel said. That would explain the tight look he had, but she still felt that he was hiding something from her even with that justification. "I'm sorry. We can postpone the sitting if you would like."

"No, no," he shook his head. "About that. We are already done here, and I think it's time to move to the last location. The garden."

“I had not realized,” Rachel murmured as she turned to look. “Where in the garden, though?”

“I had thought the gazebo would be best,” he mentioned while going to his folded easel. “You can sit comfortably, and your dress will not get dirtied. I think you should get Miss Colton to carry some pillows and a pitcher of drinks in case you get thirsty.”

“Go ahead of me,” Rachel advised. “I will be there soon.”

When he went off, she turned to her room and found Jane there. After sharing the new developments with Jane, she made sure her hair was fixed and left for the garden. William was ready for her with his easel ready and pencil set.

After Jane set the pillows down, Rachel sat sideways and gave William a tender smile—one he did not return or even see. It sent a lance of pain through her heart. Her gaze drifted to the rose bushes, and she tried to fight off the bereft feeling taking precedence in her breast.

Why is he shutting me out?

“Keep that pose...please.” William’s quiet words nearly had her jumping in shock, but she gave the most unperceivable of nods and kept her gaze on the flowers.

She heard the soft scratches of William’s pencils and breathed in the soft perfumed air, a medley of scents from the wildflowers all around

them. The sky was starting to lose the greyish shade in favor of a bright blue.

Keeping her gaze neutral, Rachel tried to keep some levity in her heart. Perhaps William was not hiding anything from her; perhaps he was just as tired as he said he was. She could give him her faith that he was telling the truth. After all, wasn't what people in love did?

Hours later, when William broke the sitting for her to go ready for her midday meal, Rachel found herself summoned to her father's study. As he had been absent from the house the past few days, Rachel felt anxious about what he was summoning her for.

But as she neared the door, the ominous feeling that this meeting was about her marriage to Lord Strathmore wrapped around her chest like a vice. She knocked briskly and got permitted to enter. Rachel stepped in and stood a foot away from the desk.

Her father looked up, "Sit."

Taking the chair there, Rachel quietly waited for him to stop writing on a ledger and close it. He then put it to the side. "Your mother is telling me that you do not want to marry Strathmore. Why is that? As far as I see, you should be happy about this Lord proposing to marry you. Is he not the younger lord you so emphatically demanded to have?"

Rachel had expected that he would trap her with her words. "I know,

Father, but he is not a family man. From what I have gleaned from our conversation, he cares little for women. He dismisses his mother and sister as if they were not important to him. Why would I marry a man like that? God forbid we have girl children. Would he ignore her too?"

Her father's lips thinned. "You are talking nonsense."

"Father!"

"Listen, Rachel, you have gotten what you want in the Lord you want to marry, and your mother and I are more than satisfied with how the man is going to provide for you and do well by you. Now stop this nonsense and start looking forward to your marriage."

"But—"

"But nothing," he said. "I have spoken, and I trust you will listen to me and do what I say. Now go and prepare for your midday meal."

Knowing that they were no chance for her changing her father's mind, Rachel clamped her lips shut and stood. "Yes, Father."

She left the room, but with no twinge of hunger, she found a book and took a seat. The book was opened on her lap, but she did not read a word. Instead, she was fuming while anger, desperation, and despondency began to make a caustic mix inside her heart.

“My Lady?” Jane asked.

She looked up and saw her friend holding her meal and regretted not telling her not to bring it up from the kitchen. “You may take it back,” Rachel said. “I am not hungry. I’ll explain when you come back.”

Jane left the room with a nod, and Rachel went back to staring numbly at her book. If she had not known her parents to be the people that she knew they were, she would have been shocked to know that they were still going to marry her off to a man who had little respect for women. But she was not.

When Jane came back and sat with her, Rachel closed the book that she had not been reading and said, “They are going to make me marry him, Jane. They do not care that he is a patriarchist with little respect for women. He wants me as a doll, Jane. A pretty, submissive thing he can dress up and parade around.”

Her voice was hollow and resounded in her ear as empty and lifeless, but what could she do?

“I do not want to be a marionette dancing for him, but that is what they want from me, and I have no way to escape it. Strathmore will not see me as any sort of equal, nor will he listen to anything I have to say. I doubt that he has a fanciful, romantic bone in his body and though he admits to being adventurous, what will that give me? Adventure with little enjoyment? What is the sense?” Rachel ended.

“That is horrible,” Jane grimaced.

“If only I could escape it all,” Rachel mourned. “It so unfair, Jane. First, they hobble me with staying home so much, they embarrass me with these horrid dresses, and I do not know half of what I should know. Then they put me up on the marriage market like a lamb to slaughter because the one request I had, not to marry so soon, was rejected. What is there for me anymore?”

“Perhaps you can make the most of it?” Jane suggested. “You can try and change the Lord’s mind to being more progressive?”

She laughed hollowly. “The odds of me changing the mind of a man who is set in his ways, from a belief that has been grounded and indoctrinated inside him, is slim to none. And if I try, it might take me a lifetime to do so.”

“Is there anything you can do?” Jane asked.

“That is yet to be seen,” Rachel sighed.

Now, William found himself avoiding Rachel as he did not know what to do or how to tell her what her parents were planning for her. He knew that the longer he avoided her, the more the gap between them would grow.

Soon, he would have the drawing done, and they would choose from the three for the best one to put to the oils. Then, when that was done, he would be on his way. Those three things were absolute, but what would happen between those?

Would he be forced to suffer from standing by to see Rachel married off to a man she despised? Would he have to stand by and see the life and vivacity she had tried so hard to keep steady inside her be snuffed out like water being thrown on a candle?

It was night, but he had a lamp lit and was working on Rachel's drawing by memory. It was not hard to bring up the image of her staring so dolefully into the distance, her gaze not truly resting on the roses.

He drew in lines and added shades to where the contrast was needed but then paused. He reached for another paper and placed it over the first to trace over the image to have the most vital lines in place. He set it aside to go back on the first image.

While he worked, a plan formed in the back of his mind for another portrait, one that would speak more to Rachel's inner character than she would ever show them.

He worked until his eyes grew heavy and his hand began to cramp, so he stopped, stowed the two drawings in his folios, then went to bed. But Lady Hurstmere's smug face stayed with him, and his anger grew. His life had been a hard one, but if fate had decided that his parents would have acted like Rachel's, he was glad that he was an orphan.

No one deserved to suffer such betrayal so close to home.

Turning on his side, he sighed. The more he thought about Rachel, the more the desire smoldering inside his gut threatened to flare to life.

The implied promise he had given her earlier that day seemed deemed to go unfulfilled.

Frustrated, he flopped on his belly to stifle the growing erection and warming need. He felt it disrespectful to pleasure himself to Rachel's image as he wanted to share satisfaction with her. If by any miracle, it could happen.

Chapter 15

“He is avoiding me,” Rachel mentioned to Jane after they came from a fourth session in the garden. “But why?”

“Perhaps you can ask him during tomorrow’s session,” Jane said as she went to get a new dress. “We have to prepare for Lord Strathmore’s visit.”

The mention of the man’s name had Rachel’s teeth gritting. Her mother was still going on with this farce. The only option she had was to be so unattractive that the man would find her unsuitable and move away before he even gave in to the formal engagement.

She donned the gown Jane handed her and sat to have her hair redone. “I cannot think why he would be avoiding me.”

Jane sighed while sliding a comb into her hair. “Do you remember when you were shying away from him? Perhaps it is something similar?”

Thinking back to when she had been unsure about sharing her feelings with William, Rachel shook her head. “He knows how I feel, and he feels the same. If it is something about that, I would think he would come to me and say something.”

“I do not know what to tell you, My Lady,” Jane shrugged. “But I think you should concentrate on your time with Lord Strathmore.”

While knowing Jane was right, Rachel kept her concerns about William in the back of her mind. She arrived at the drawing-room and sat while the maid came in to set the tray of refreshments on the coffee table.

Lord Strathmore came in, his bright wheat-colored hair immaculately pomaded and his trim figure clad in fashionable grey buff trousers, matching waistcoat. She would stand and curtsy, but with her mission to dissuade him from pushing the courtship, she kept sitting.

His brow lifted, but he did not mention it. "Good day, My Lady, you are as radiant as ever."

"Thank you," she smiled. "How are you doing?"

"Same of the same," he waved. "Chasing down artifacts and hobnobs the Prince Regent takes a fancy to. I had to track down a Golden Eagle from Spain. And how are you?"

"I am thinking of writing a book," Rachel mentioned casually. "I happen to know a few other ladies who have written successful books. Of course, they have to pen it as a man, but it is an idea I am thinking about."

His brows lowered. "And what sort of book would this be?"

"I have not decided yet," Rachel said. "It might be a tawdry romance novel, but I thought about more. Perhaps an academic book, maybe

one on travel. Maybe even contribute to the papers on government. I do know something about law.”

Lord Strathmore gave her a long look before throwing his head back and laughing. “Goodness, you seem so grave about it. I almost thought that you were serious. Thank you for giving me a lovely laugh, my dear. Now would you pour me my coffee?”

“Why do you think it’s a jest?” Rachel asked.

His brow cocked, “Because you can never do either, and certainly not when we are wed. A woman does not work under my roof. You will control the house and maids and plan parties and all such womanly work, but academic pursuits are not for you, darling.”

Astounded by his candor and dismissiveness, Rachel pressed, “But what if I want to write?”

“You will have all the journals you would like, and you may write for your personal amusement, but you will not send anything to any publisher or even the newspaper,” Strathmore said jauntily.

“You think that a woman’s place is solely in the home?” her mouth dropped.

“Of course it is,” he said. “That is how it was from the dawn of time and how it will be in our house. I will not settle for anything less. Now, my coffee?”

With her teeth grit, Rachel poured out his drink. "Tell me, what more are women not allowed to do in your home?"

Nonchalantly, he reached for his cup and launched into a spiel that made her want to pour the whole kettle of hot coffee into his lap. She could not believe that this man was so entitled and dogmatic, harping on about how delicate the female disposition was. And how frail they were, so they could not take on higher academic ventures. By the time he was finished, she felt ready to be sick. If she married this man, she would be putting herself in a lifelong commitment of torment.

Her plan had not worked, and it stung her a little. She had not said her plan decisively enough, making Lord Strathmore see through it so quickly. But she could not stomach being in the same room with the man. Now she knew why the two ladies he had told her about had rejected him, and she doubted that they were as spirited as he had told her.

Most likely, they disagreed with one thing he wanted from them and he found them unfit.

She rested her untouched cup of tea down, "I am sorry, My Lord, but I am not feeling well. Will you visit again, on the morrow mayhap?"

He peered at her from over his cup, then rested it. "I see."

Fearful that she had pushed him far enough that he would go to her parents, Rachel reached out for his hand. "Look at my face. You can see that I am not well."

His eyes skimmed over her forehead, “You do look pale, wan, and a bit sickly.”

Relieved, Rachel pulled away, “I was not trying to trick you; I truly do not feel well.”

“I can see it,” he said while brushing a lock of her hair from her face. He brazenly leaned in and kissed her cheek. “I understand. This is what I meant by the female disposition. You are so delicate.”

She did not dare to contest his words because soon, she would be free of him. He stood and helped her to her feet. “I will see you sometime this week, My Lady, as I am afraid tomorrow is full for me.”

Rachel managed a curtsy. “That’s perfectly fine. I will see you then.”

They both left the room, and she stood at the landing of the stairs to watch him go. As soon as he donned his coat and hat, turned to her, and tipped it, she went off to her room.

“You heard him, didn’t you?” Rachel asked. “How much of a troglodyte can he be?”

“He was very opinionated, I will say that much,” Jane said as she wrinkled her nose.

“Say it as it is,” Rachel huffed. “He is a foul, entitled mistake for a

human being.”

“Shall I get you some tea?” Jane asked. “You do look a bit pale.”

“That is all because of his words,” Rachel said. “He went on so much that it turned my stomach upside down. I cannot believe men in this time and age when women are doing so many wonderful things, that he is ready to chain us back to the bedpost.”

“Shall I get the tea?”

“Yes, please.”

With a calculated guess, Rachel left for the garden just as it neared dusk. She remembered her decision not to be so demonstrative with William but had to talk to him and hoped that he was somewhere there. She did not find him in the first section, so she left for the gazebo.

She spotted his back and tousled head and made her way to him. As she stepped on the flooring, she knew that he had heard her but had not turned. From the motion of his hand, she could see that he was drawing and came to a stop near him.

For once, she saw something odd; he was staring at the rose bush unblinkingly while his hand kept shading in a rose. She did not move

and watched the amazing sight with awe. When he dropped the pencil, he did drop his eyes.

“That is amazing,” she said. “How did you do that?”

He shrugged, “It does not happen too much but when it does it is because I tend to sink into deep focus.”

She turned to him, “Would you mind telling me why you have not looked me in the eyes for the past three days?”

Instead of shying away from her, he did stare at her. “What do you mean? I am looking at you right now.”

“I mean before this,” Rachel said. “Through all the sessions we had, it felt like I was pulling your teeth for you to say two words to me. Is it something I did? If it is, please tell me?”

“I don’t know what you mean,” William said slowly. “You have not done anything to me.”

Rachel felt herself flailing, “But why so silent?”

“There is nothing Rachel.”

Now she was getting desperate, “Stop lying to me. I know something

is going on. What is it? And do you not dare tell me it is nothing again. I know there is!”

“Rachel—” His placating tone made her shatter.

“Do you know what happened to me today?” she cried, slumping honestly into a bench. “That horrid Lord Strathmore came, and he told me—he told me what he expects a woman, his wife, should be. And it’s all horrid. He has no respect for women at all, and he thinks we are just made to have children and-and—” her breath began to hitch. “—And I c-cannot—”

His warm embrace quieted her, and hidden in his hold, she managed to hold back the tears. As if he were listening to her thoughts, his lips dotted soothing kisses along her hairline.

Her body shook under his, and the distress she felt so acutely began to simmer. “I will not live if I marry him, William, and neither of my parents cares.”

“I do,” he said, “God knows I do, but I cannot do anything about it. I wish I could, but I have no place to do it.”

A small plaintive cry left her mouth. “I cannot do this.”

“I know,” he said. “I know, and I pray you would not have to, but what other way is there?”

“I—” she sniffled. “I do not know.”

With either of them unsure about what to do, all she could do was to hold unto William for the comfort he was giving her. She still had not gotten an answer as to why he had avoided her for the four days, but it did not matter at the moment. All that mattered was where she was, in his arms, and comforted.

He rested his cheek on her temple. “Please do not be angry with me.”

Drawn out of the peaceful interlude she had sunk in, Rachel tilted her head up. “What do you mean?”

William’s eyes clenched tight before he opened them and met her gaze. “I had been avoiding you, and I hated why I did it. Before I say why, please know that it has been cutting me inside for days.”

She peeled herself from his side as worry began to set in. “What is it?”

“The other day after we met here in the morning, your mother came to me and asked me how long it would take to finish this new portrait because in a week’s time, well from now, she, and I assume your father as well, will be engaging you to Lord Strathmore.”

Lurching away from him, Rachel scuttled to the farthest end of the bench with horror painted on her face. “What?”

He reached out for her, but she shot off the bench, making William

follow her. "I am sorry, I did not know how to tell you. I thought that it would make you more distressed than you already are, and I did not want to give you more."

"But why not tell me after?" she asked. "Were you going to sit on it until they packed me into the carriage and sent me away?"

"No—"

"Then when?" she stepped away. "When were you going to tell me?"

He dropped his hand and sank to the bench after a moment, his face falling into despair. "I feared for the worst, sweetheart. With all the distress you had, I felt that you would shatter into nothing."

His head tipped back, and his eyes stared blankly up into the hipped ceiling. "You do not deserve this, Rachel. You do not deserve to be betrayed and stabbed in the back this way. You do not deserve to be used as a trading chip for your selfish parents. And I hate it."

His tender tone had her inching towards him, and while he kept staring up ahead, she sat near him. "You do?"

Twisting his head, he looked lost. "How could I not? A tender soul like you needs to be loved, cared for, and cherished. Not be used only as a child-bearer and an ornament."

Leaning against him, Rachel whispered. "I'm sorry for how I reacted. I

can see why you would not have known how to tell me that.”

“It haunted me for days,” he said. “Another reason why I could not sleep.”

“What kills me is why would Mother not tell me?” Rachel said. “Does she not regard me at all? This is my life. Why would she not tell me?”

William did not speak for a moment then asked, “Has your mother ever told you that she loves you, Rachel?”

Blinking, she tried to recall the times her stoic mother had told her those tender words. “A few times. Not much, mostly when I was a child, but as I grew, she tapered.”

“My parents were not as rich or sophisticated as yours are, but they told me they loved me every day,” William said. “I contrast your life to mine a few times. They died but loved me, while yours are alive but see you as nothing but a pawn. I may be wrong—”

“You’re not wrong,” Rachel said.

“—but no loving parent does this to a child they love or say they love,” William ended.

Nearing him, Rachel leaned into his side. “My parents are very tiered and complicated.”

“As in, they give to the church but do not dare to go visit a widow or orphanage? William asked.

“Yes.”

“Or is it that they provide supplies to the destitute but do not step a foot in a poor house themselves?”

“Yes.”

“Is it that they would pray in the church for all and sundry but would not do so in someone’s home?”

Snorting, Rachel said, “Yes.”

“This is why I sometimes despise the rich,” William said. “Most of them are hypocrites. You might disagree, but I have been in the homes of many peers, and the image they give to the outside is nothing close to the life they live inside.”

“I can understand that,” Rachel mentioned.

He tugged her closer and kissed her temple. “You are not one of them. There is not a duplicitous bone in your body.”

“I did not know what to do before, and I still do not know what to do now,” Rachel admitted. “I cannot confront my mother again as that had not worked before, and it will not work again. What am I going to do?”

“Do you have any friends you can go to?” William asked.

“No,” she shook her head. “And that would not work at all; they would just come for me.”

“Another reason why these parents are not true to you,” William said. “They have cut you off from people, ladies your age, to keep you wholly dependent on them and to mold you into what they want from you. They are not worthy of being called parents.”

“It is a hard thing to say, but yes, I must admit it is true,” Rachel twisted her head to look at the darkening sky. “But I am trapped, William. I have no one to run to, and even if I did, I would not get far.”

William reached for her hand and held it, “I love you, and if I had any way...”

His words trailed off, but Rachel knew what he was trying to say, and she appreciated it. “I know,” looking over her shoulder to the house, she added, “I will see you on the morrow.”

“Good night, sweetheart,” he said tenderly. “Forgive me?”

She kissed his cheek, "Of course."

"Thank you," he smiled.

Taking the path, she got inside, made it to her room and found Jane waiting on her. "Jane..." she asked the maid. "Is something wrong?"

Silently, Jane gestured to a dress resting on the bed. "Her Grace has sent up your engagement dress, My Lady. Lord Strathmore is going to come in a sennight to ask you to marry him."

Chapter 16

Uneasily, Rachel twisted and turned in her bed. The knowledge that she was soon to be married off—no, traded off—for her parent's gain rested heavily on her chest. Her sleep was uneasy, and her dreams were mired in smoke and mystery.

Callused male hands slid up her body, the roughness of them making the depths of her body quiver. He took her arms with his hand to pin them over her head, pushing a gasp from her.

It was then that her other senses came into play, and she found herself on a bed of the softest down and her head clouded with desire. Her body trembled with anticipation while her lungs were filled with the familiar scent of olive soap and citrus.

"My prince..." she moaned.

He chuckled while his mouth skimmed down her neck, "I am not a prince."

"Warrior then?"

"No."

She tried to lift her hand but felt them still trapped—a frightening seductive act. His lips inched to her mouth, and while Rachel knew

that it would be prudent to turn away, but she did not. His kiss was potent enough to make her bones melt, and her heart become liquid.

“You taste of bon-bons and honey...” a husky voice said in her ear as the man’s mouth skimmed over her jaw to get to the curve of her ear. He nipped the tender lobe, and shocks danced along the delicate shell. “I love you, sweetheart. Your body is calling to me.”

She panted as the sensations unfurled within her, and she tried to focus but felt her head clouded with desire. She felt the tips of her breasts turned taut and throbbing against her chemise, and a strange wet heat pooled between her thighs.

“Let me go,” she whispered.

His hands lifted, and she reached for him, winding her arms about his neck as he bent to move his lips down her body. As she swooned at his kisses, she gasped at the shock of his hot skin covering hers. Heat rolled off his skin, burning hers in a wonderful revelation.

He was far larger and heavier than she, and Rachel could easily have been overpowered by him, yet his hands were gentle, his touch almost worshipful as he explored her body. The hair on his chest was coarse, chafing delightfully against her sensitive silky flesh. Rachel shivered again as his lips traced over her collarbone and dipped to her nipple.

The contrast of his hot mouth and cool air from the window making her skin break out in gooseflesh. Their kisses became deeper, a growing urgency possessing her body. Desperate for more of him, needing to be closer, she raised her legs, clinging to his hips, an instinctive movement that her lover took no time in responding to.

She gripped at his shoulders, insensible at the feel of his lips pressing open-mouthed kisses down her neck. Adding fuel to a fire that was beyond containing. The shimmering sensation building inside her, clutching at his shoulders as he murmured into her ear.

“I want you...but you are not mine,” he whispered, “...you are another’s.”

She peeled her eyes open and gazed into...burning green eyes. “...William?”

He began to fade away. “I love you...but you are not mine.”

She woke with a gasp and clutching her sheets. Her heart was racing, and her body was trembling. “William...”

William had been her lover. But the more she thought about it, the more it made sense. No man had touched her intimately before, and with the sensual kisses and touches William gave her, she realized that she craved it. Now, she wondered if her dreams were anywhere close to the real feeling.

Sitting up, Rachel let her mind wander; William was so much older, at least ten years. He had to be familiar with women, while she knew nothing about men. He had to know that his kiss was the first one she had ever felt and that his touch was delivered on virgin skin.

Her eyes landed on the still darkened curtains showing that dawn had

not come yet. Was William awake already?

Does he think about me the way I dream of him?

She slipped from the bed, Rachel donned her dressing gown and went to the window. For as long as she could remember, she loved to see the sunrise, but moreover, she would love to see it in other places. Towns and cities or even countries far away from London.

Perched on a window seat, Rachel pulled her knees up to her chin and rested her arms over them. The sunrise was meaningful for her, especially in the last few years when her need to break away from the increasingly difficult life she lived. The rising sun meant new chances to find new things, but lately, the expectations of newness had begun to dim.

Until William had come into her life. His eccentricities showed her that nothing had to be as routine and colorless as her life was. William saw life in a way Rachel wished she could, one of vibrancy and vitality she could hardly imagine. And that too she craved.

What is it like to live with such clarity of life?

Grey began to lighten the horizon, and soon the landscape came into brighter definition. Then, William's tousled head appeared, and she watched as he went to a bench, sat with his pad of papers on his knee, and his hand began to fly over it.

She wondered what he was drawing but knew he was warping what he saw with some symbolism of something else. A bird could be an

angel, or a rose could be a forest of thorns.

Rachel wanted to sneak out and join him but held back. The times she had done so successfully without being discovered came to her with warm sensations in her heart, but she knew it was risky to keep chancing it.

“My Lady, you’re awake already?” Jane asked as she came into the room.

Dropping the drapes, Rachel climbed down from the seat. “Good morning, Jane. Are my parents asking for me?”

“Not that I am aware of, My Lady,” Jane said. “Shall I call for your water or bring up your breakfast?”

“Bath, please,” Rachel said. “I would like to speak with my parents about this engagement.”

After the bath and dressing, Rachel found her parents in her father’s study. “Mother, Father, may I speak with you?”

“Not now, daughter,” her mother waved her off dismissively. “We can speak later on.”

Her heart soured. “It is important, Mother.”

“I doubt it,” Lady Mary said contemptuously. “It will wait.”

“But—”

Her father lifted his head, “Rachel, we are discussing something especially important, and your mother has told you, twice, that we are not ready to speak with you. Go back to your room, and we will summon you when we are ready.”

Unable to feel anything but hollow, Rachel said a few parting words and went to her room but diverted to the gardens in case William was still there. The morning mist was still lingering over the grass and the perfume from the night flowers was sweet in the air.

“William?” she asked while nearing him.

His eyes lifted, and a smile flirted at his lips. “Good morning, sweetheart. How was your night?”

She hesitated on admitting the truth but decided since he was not going to be there much longer, how much would it hurt? “I dreamed of you.”

William’s brows disappeared in his hair. “Did you now? May I ask, what was I doing?”

Her head ducked, and a blush stained her face, “I would rather not

say.”

Rough fingertips held her chin and turned Rachel back to him. A warm, vibrant heat rested in William’s eyes, “I see. Your face tells me all I needed to know. I was kissing you, wasn’t I?”

“In...the most of it, yes,” she replied. “I—”

Her words were cut off because he was leaning into her, and Rachel could read the intention to kiss her ripe in his eyes. But the rustling of a bush had her jerking away and scooting to sit at the far end of the bench. And in good time too as a gardener came around the corner to attend to a shrub.

The man gave them a cursory glance but a more formal greeting when he realized that Rachel was sitting there. Her heart was pounding out of her breastbone at the realization that she had nearly gotten caught in a compromising position.

When her heart calmed a little, Rachel asked, “May I see what you’ve drawn?”

He silently handed over the paper, and she spotted a strange image made from clouds. The more she stared at it, the more she traced the form of a woman, ephemeral, and made of mist. She tried to imagine what he meant by it.

Before she could ask, Jane hurried into the garden, “My Lady, your parents are asking for you.”

Startled, Rachel handed William the paper, and after promising to meet him in the gazebo for that morning sitting, she hurried into the house in time to meet her parents in her rooms.

Her mother's gaze was censuring. "Where were you?"

"I took a turn around the garden," Rachel replied. "I wanted to pass some time."

"Your father and I are going to Manchester for three days," Lady Mary declared. "There is a conference there that we cannot dare miss. You will be home under the oversight of the housekeeper, and I trust that you will take care to follow her orders."

Rachel blinked. "You are going away?"

"Yes, and you are to be on your best behavior," Lady Mary ordered. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, mother." Rachel refrained from rolling her eyes. "I do."

"Good," she said. "We are leaving this afternoon, and we hope that when we come back, most of that drawing will be done so we can transition to making that painting."

"And my engagement, I suppose," Rachel said sullenly.

“Yes,” Lady Mary said. “I am going to ignore that tone because one day, you will see that what your father and I are doing is the best for you.”

While resenting the blithe tone her mother used to dismiss her again, Rachel decided to take the gift of her parents leaving as the boon that it was. “Thank you for telling me; I should have my breakfast now.”

After her meal Rachel found herself in the garden with William. As she moved to her seat, she felt his eyes skimming over her body, and when she met his gaze, she could see the question resting in them. But he did not ask, and for that, she was grateful.

They hardly spoke during the session, only with William giving her soft commands to tilt her head up a little or to shift her body this way or that. Jane came by with glasses of water and lemonade with the news that her parents had left, and Rachel felt her teeth grit.

“They have left?” William asked over his glass of water.

“Yes,” Rachel replied. “Somewhere in Manchester for three days.”

William’s hand hovered over his paper, “Interesting.”

“Hardly,” Rachel muttered. “Not when I have less than six days to ready myself to marry a man who will never respect me or love me.”

She had kept her tone low, but by the look on William's face, the wind must have blown her words to him. Thankfully, he still did not say a word about it. His brows dipped in concentration, and he went back to drawing, leaving her to exhale the tremulous breath trapped in her chest.

Rachel shared a look with Jane, but then they slipped back into silence. Hours later, when William broke the sitting, Rachel asked Jane to leave them a little. With a hesitant nod, Jane left them, and Rachel sat forward. "I think you heard that, didn't you?"

"I have," William responded while wiping his hands clean of the dust from the pencils. "It distresses me more than you can think how they are damning you to a fate that will kill your bright, precious soul."

Sighing, Rachel said, "They do not care. I wish—" she broke off shaking her head. "—It doesn't matter."

He reached over and nudged her head up with his knuckles. "No, it matters to me. What is it?"

"I wish I could...I hate to say it, but rebel a little, you know. Do something my parents would hate to see me do, be a little wild," Rachel blurted.

"Like what?" he asked.

"I don't know," she despaired. "But I want to do something."

He pulled away from her, "Are you sure?"

"Yes," Rachel shrugged. "But it's only a dream; one I cannot see coming true. I wish I had not said anything. Please forget it."

He nodded and turned away, but as Rachel said her goodbyes and headed inside, Rachel had the suspicion that William had not forgotten anything she had said. She loved that he cared about her, and Rachel knew that he would do all he could to help her if given the chance, but she knew that he could not.

That night, she realized that her assumption was wrong.

She was readying for bed when Jane came to her. "My Lady. Mr. Smith wants to take you somewhere."

Shaken, Rachel asked, "It is past seven. Take me where?"

"He did not tell me, My Lady," Jane said. "He only said that you wanted to do something wild."

Redness coated her cheeks at knowing that her maid had learned her secret. "Should I get dressed?"

"I think you should," Jane said as she stepped into Rachel's wardrobe

and came back with a hooded cloak over her arm and a pair of half-boots. "I am not sure where he is taking you, but I doubt silk slippers will do well."

She changed quickly and followed Jane to the servant's door, where William stood as cloaked as she was. Before she went to him, she turned to Jane. "Why are you doing this?"

"Because I think you should be happy as much as you can be before you are married off," Jane said staunchly. "If I lose my position, so be it. I think Mr. Smith is going to take care of you. Now go."

With her heart in her throat, Rachel left the last step and went to William's side. From under the cowl of his cloak, she saw his eyes glimmer like cut gems. Wordlessly, he reached for her, grasped her hand, and following the shadows, left the main part of the manor.

He led her to a waiting hackney and helped her in, then told the driver a word that had her body trembling, "To Vauxhall."

"William," she whispered fervently. "Are you sure?"

"Yes, sweetheart, I am," William assured her. He then pulled an object from a satchel she had not realized he'd been carrying and handed it to her. It was a mask made of delicate white feathers. "Wear this tonight as a masked ball is happening there."

She let him slip the mask over her face and felt the softest of velvet on her skin. He smiled, then tilted her head up just to lay a warm kiss on her lips. "A masked angel."

“And you?” Rachel asked. “What are you going to be?”

He plucked a colorful jester’s mask from the satchel and slipped it over his nose. “What people have thought I am for most of my life.”

Rachel bit her lips in horror. “What?”

“Don’t fret about it,” he grinned. “I am fully comfortable with them thinking so. Sometimes you must pretend to be what you are not just to have peace around you. Something I think you know all too well.”

“Sadly, I do,” Rachel said as she looked out the window.

Rarely had she had the chance to look on London at nighttime, as her parents had always had the velvet curtain down when they came back from the few balls she attended.

What she saw both puzzled and broke her heart. Children were in rags. Drunken men streamed from taverns with bottles in their hands, and women in slips of nothing disappeared down the dark alley mouths with men in tow.

“Tis very different than you would have thought this great city was, hm?” William asked knowingly.

“Very,” Rachel replied. “It’s troubling. Are those women...”

“Harlots, yes,” William said. “For many of them, it is their only way to maintain a livelihood. Most of those children you see are orphans at the bidding of gang leaders. They do not have happy lives, and some of them are starved if they do not bring back enough valuables for the leader to pawn.”

“No...” Rachel whispered.

“Sadly, yes,” he said as they left the town square and headed west. “London is a place where the wealthy live in paradise, the poor live in squalor, and those in the middle barely eke out a living.”

Rachel kept watching as the vehicle trundled down the roads and onto a bridge that headed to Vauxhall. Even from afar, Rachel saw lights burst in the sky.

“Fireworks!” she gasped. “Oh, my word. I would love to see them.”

“You will,” he assured her.

They came to the gate where William paid the three shillings over, and they started on the Grand Walk. From the sides, she saw paths diverging from the main one, snaking their way into darkness. But what kept her eyes dancing were the innumerable colored paper lamps hung on the trees that made her think she was walking in a rainbow.

“Oh, William,” she held his hand tightly. “It is magical.”

“It is,” he agreed as they came down the lane to a large round where merry music flowed from the orchestra above. William turned to her, “Care to dance?”

Chapter 17

It was magical seeing the expression that ran across Rachel's face as she took in all the glory that Vauxhall was. He wondered if she had begun to strike down the sordid, depraved image that her parents had put in her head about the place and replace it with the mystical, vibrant place that it was proving itself to be.

"Yes," she placed her hand in his. "I would love to dance with you."

Smiling he led her unto the packed dance floor, and he held her close as the maddened version of a waltz had them dancing fast and spinning in crazed whirls. He swung her into another dizzying turn, and she burst out in a giddy laugh that rippled over his senses.

The people around them did not mind when they bumped into them, as they too were brushing into others. The heat from the crowd and the bodily exertion almost made the rotunda feel stifling. But that did not stop Rachel; she shone under the gas lamp with a different glow. One more mesmerizing and enthralling than he had ever seen before.

Rachel was dazzling as she danced; he drank the image in as if he were a starving man standing before a table loaded with food. Rachel danced with perfect synchrony to his, and when the music changed from the mad spins to a more sedate tempo, the waltz aroused him.

It was not hard for him to imagine her flushed face on a bed of rose petals, her lithe body arching to the pleasure he was giving her. His hand slipped from the middle of her back to the small, supple curve of her spine as he spun them again.

His head dipped to her ear, "Tell me what I did to you in your dream."

She ducked her head, and red painted up her neck to burn her ears bright. "Naughty girl. Tell me."

"Not...not here," she whispered. "Anywhere else."

"I will hold you to that," William said as the dance dwindled to a close.

After the patrons applauded, William took her hand, and they left the rotunda. The cold air was like a slap to the face after the heat of the rotunda, and he shivered. Knowing that Rachel had to feel the same, he pulled her under his arm and kissed her temple.

"You danced beautifully," he praised her.

"I would hope so," she laughed. "It took a lot of improvising, I will tell you that much."

The night sky was ablaze with brilliant stars as they walked away from the main walk further into the park. As they approached the twists and turns of The Lovers' Walks, he saw couples darting into shadowed alcoves and squares hemmed in by tall bushes. They even passed where the unmistakable sound of sexual activity hung in the air.

“Well,” he smiled. “They are having fun.”

“Pardon?”

“Inside that nook we just passed, a couple is having a certain *rendezvous*,” he said, knowing that she would catch onto his insinuation.

“Rendezvous...*Oh!*” Rachel exclaimed. “Mother was right then.”

“In some ways, but it is not all flagrant debauchery that happens here, and I think you just experienced one of them,” William said. “There are acrobats, fireworks, a supper room, and the cascade.”

“Cascade?”

As she spoke, the sound of rushing water began to grow and drown out her words. A bell rang, and William tugged her down the path and came to the banks of the cascade just at the exact appearance of water rushing down the fake rocks and tin sheets. They watched at the gush, illuminated by concealed lights, spun a wagon wheel spurring foam to rise up at the bottom and then glideaway.

Rachel had her hands up by her mouth, wide-eyed and slightly trembling as the fifteen-minute display went on. When it ended, William gently led her away from it to the Lover’s Walk, serpentine trails that led to secret alcoves and nooks that truly gave the pleasure gardens its name.

They ducked into an alcove that luckily had a lamp swinging on a branch of the colossal elms overhead. A breeze shivered against her cheek, but she did not have to wait to warm up. William closed her in his arms.

“I am so happy you brought me here,” Rachel murmured.

“Not as much as I am,” William said as he cupped her cheek in one hand and gave her a warm, sensual kiss. His tongue played with the seam of her lips before she parted them and let him glide in and out in a way that was both carnal but gentle. A soft moan came from her mouth out as she grasped the lapels of his cloak while his hands smoothed up the curve of her back.

The sensation of his mouth moving over hers was tender but knowing where they were made it that much more exhilarating. It was an intimate sensation, sharing his breath, his taste, his scent, and feeling his hands roam all over her body.

There, sequestered under the thick canopy of giant elms and dense foliage of bushes, Rachel had the privacy she needed to unleash her inner desire. She hiked up her skirts and straddled William’s lap, lacing her arms around his neck while he wrapped his around her waist.

His mouth landed on hers with bristling heat, and the kiss surged with ravenous hunger. William’s kiss was hot and fierce; their tongues twisted, twined, and stroked the other. Rachel could not have enough

of him, his taste, the hard feel of him, and the fierce sweetness of his kiss. She gave in to her base desire twisting her insides.

William's hand cupped her bottom and held her tight, "You're rubbing on me, sweetheart."

The words were muffled in her ear, but she understood enough to pull away. "Rubbing?"

His eyes were heavy-lidded but held emerald fire. "Yes, sweet, on *me*."

From under her thigh, she felt hardness resting on William's thigh and realized he meant his member. Without thinking, she did it again and felt him; he was so hard...and large.

Mortified, Rachel stammered out an apology, but William kissed her words away. "I like you rubbing on me, sweetheart. Tell me...are you damp between your legs?"

She blushed. "Yes."

He kissed her jaw and bit at her ear, "May I touch you there?"

In her hesitancy, he bent his head and suckled on the lobe of her ear—fiercely, without restraint. Her fingers dug into his scalp, wanting to hold onto the unexpected but exhilarating pleasure as warmth flooded her body, dampening her thighs even more.

“Yes, yes, please,” she gasped out. “Touch me.”

His mouth skimmed over her jaw and ear before dipping to her neck and dropping kisses on her tender skin while his hand skimmed up her bent shin and slid her dress up. She felt his hands trace over the cloth of her drawers, over her bottom, and up her inner thigh.

“Has any man touched you here?” he asked thickly.

“N-no,” Rachel shook her head and held fast on his shoulder. “You’re the first.”

He kissed her neck. “I’m honored, beautiful.”

His fingertips skimmed over her inner thigh, a breath away from her intimacy, and he hummed. “I feel how wet you are, love. I must touch you.”

As his finger skimmed over her wetness, Rachel felt as if a rod of lightning had run through her. She gasped as the shocking pleasure raced up her spine, turning her belly into liquid.

“You are so perfect,” he whispered thickly against her neck. “A goddess among men. I am fortunate to be your servant.”

Lost in newfound bliss, Rachel’s hips jerked as his palm cupped her,

sliding along her slickness. Her fingers sunk into his shoulders while he teased and tantalized her body. His thumb circled the peak of her pleasure, and she gasped out a cry before hiding her face in his neck.

Her position gave him enough room to whisper heated, seductive, erotic words in her ear, decimating her control and driving her deeper and deeper into her base desire.

His fingers slipped into her body, sending more indescribable sensations through her. His lips whispered, "Put your hands on my shoulders."

Feverish with desire, she obeyed. She lifted herself a little and looped her arms around his neck and back while William's fingers thrust into her and his thumb strummed her secret nub like a harpist.

Broken and garbled pleas escaped her. Rachel felt herself crying out for fulfilment of the slick friction coiling tighter in her belly. Her knees threatened to give out.

She hung on tighter. "Please, William, please. I need to... help me!"

Bowing to her wish, he bent his head and sucked hard on her pulse point. His teeth grazed her sensitive skin at the same time he thrust hard her into her body and flicked her nub. "Spend for me...now."

In a strangled cry, Rachel hurtled over the edge of a cliff she had not known existed, the sensation rushing through her body searing her senses to dust. Her mouth gave a soundless scream as bliss melted her bones into honey.

William held her fast, dropping kisses on her cheek, while her mind reeled. “I’m here sweetheart. I will never let you go.”

The next morning, Rachel woke up in her bed with hazy memories of how she had gotten home. She remembered William half-walking, half-carrying her out of the pleasure gardens to a waiting hackney. She recalled coming to her home and entering through one of the many back doors and into her room to disrobe and get into bed.

But none of that mattered. The only thing that did was the pleasure William had given her on that bench, hidden away from the world. Never had she thought that level of pleasure existed or that she could have felt it. But it had, and she had soared to heaven with it.

Her hand pressed on her heart, and her body trembled a little at the memory of the soul-wracking pleasure that had possessed her body. But more than that, the words William had said in her ear, as lovingly and kind as she could ever hear, were words that she held dear, *I’m here, sweetheart. I will never let you go.*

Clarity struck her, as clear and bright as the sunlight streaming through her window. She knew beyond a doubt that she was fully and completely in love with William.

She stared at the wall with what felt like new eyes. Rachel was in love with him, and the emotion made her feel giddy. Love, something she had hoped to have for the man who claimed her heart, was a warm,

delicate emotion. It was as if the emotion were a glass ball that she had to cradle in her palms as one wrong move would let it slip and shatter on the ground.

But while she basked in it, a traitorous thought came on the heels of her revelation. Did William feel the same way? Suddenly, the light, airy feeling that had taken her heart began to sink like a stone flung into a river.

Sitting up, Rachel sighed, "Why did I have to dampen such a good feeling?"

The sunlight splayed all over her rooms told her that it was past midmorning and that she had slept extremely late. Slipping out of bed, Rachel grasped her housecoat and went to wash her mouth and face while wondering if the time had come for her to meet with William.

Jane came into the room and smiled brightly. "You're awake."

"I am," she replied. "And thank you helping William last night. It was glorious, Jane."

"Where did you go?" Jane asked.

After looking over her shoulder, she leaned in and giddily whispered, "Vauxhall."

Shock ran over Jane's face. "The pleasure gardens? Oh my!"

"Yes," Rachel smiled. "It was wonderous. I saw fireworks. I saw a magnificent waterfall, and I went dancing. It's a magical place, Jane. Wonderous even. I wish to go back sometime."

"Is it not as scandalous as they say?"

"Oh, it is," Rachel said. "Very much, but that does not matter. What does is that... I'm in love with William, Jane."

Her maid sunk to a chair, but Jane did not look surprised. "For a long time now, I suspected it would be this way."

Joining her on the couch, Rachel asked, "You're not surprised?"

"No," Jane shook her head. "I've seen the way you look at him and the way he looks at you. I don't think your feelings are one-sided."

I'm here sweetheart. I will never let you go.

She blinked. "You think so?"

"Yes," Jane assured her, as her face morphed into one of sadness. "But this puts you in a bind, doesn't it? You are going to be engaged in a few days and married off soon after."

“I know,” Rachel mourned. “I—I don’t know what do now.”

Shaking her head, Jane stood. “I wish I could give you an answer about it, but I cannot. I can only hope that somehow it will all work out in your favor. I’m going to arrange for your bath. I assume Mr. Smith will be expecting you soon if he has not already.”

With Jane gone, Rachel turned to the window. “I hope so too, Jane. I hope so too.”

Working from memory, William added more to Rachel’s portrait, shading some areas, and outlining others. He worked by habit, but his mind was on the most beautiful picture Rachel had ever given him; that of her in the throes of bliss.

The flutter of her lashes against her cheeks, the warm, aroused red of those satiny cheeks, the way her plump lips had parted, and the musical cries of completion that had come from those lips.

His hand faltered a little as he outlined her ear, and his eyes closed. Seeing her like that, a haze of lust had ripped through his body, and it had almost—*almost*—snapped the thread of control he had held onto so dearly.

Rachel was untried, a virgin, and she deserved more than a sordid

romp on a hard bench in Vauxhall as her first time into lovemaking. She deserved a soft bed, with perfumed sheets and rose petals sprinkled around her.

He shifted the pencil from his right hand to his left and kept on drawing. Again, the more he thought about Rachel, the peril she found herself in, and his need to save her from it, the more he ran into obstacles harder than a brick wall.

I have no right.

I have no place to object.

I have no way to save her.

The thoughts came one after another and circled his mind like a torrent. No matter how he tried to imagine a solution, he could not find one. He heard soft footsteps coming from behind him but did not turn to see her, and he knew she understood why.

Rachel rested a hand on his free shoulder. "Starting without me?"

"T" wasn't hard," he said softly. "Your face is unforgettable, and especially with my mind, it's not difficult."

As she took her seat and smiled, William detected a change in that motion. Her smile was not forced nor tightlipped, and he sensed a true joy behind it.

Is it because of last night?

He could not ask her, even though he knew full well that Rachel had shared what had happened last night with his co-conspirator as soon as she had woken up. When he had first approached Miss Colton with the hair-brained plan, he had been sure that she would have refused him, but no. Instead, she had agreed with him to take her mistress out that night without knowing where they were going.

All she had said was, *I trust you.*

Now, he saw a difference, a glimmer in her eye, a curve in her lips. True happiness. Pleased, he set about his work, comfortable in the secret they shared amongst them.

Chapter 18

Hours later, when William called for the sitting to end, Rachel sent her maid inside and stood from her seat and came to him. “How was your night?”

Daring, William brushed a curl from her cheek. “The most restful I have had in weeks.”

“Good.” She placed her palm against his hard jaw. “I don’t know if you’ve realized, but I have feelings for you, William. When I am with you, I am myself. I can be as free as I want to be as I have never been before. You do not see me as others do. I know that the ton sees me as a weak, cowed-down wallflower who is destined to go unmarried and unloved. And...” she said, flushing yet. “I never thought I would be as happy and peaceful as I am with you.”

His hands closed over hers. “I’m in love with you, Rachel.” He said plainly. “I think I have been since I first laid eyes on you.”

Her breath was shuddery. “I doubted myself in hoping that you would say that as I love you—am *in love* with you. Being with you, laying in your arms is like a warm blanket, comforting. And I... I desire you.”

He stood and tugged her to her feet as well. Caging her face with both hands he said, “It torments me to know that I cannot take you away from here. From this inevitable marriage that I know you are fearing.”

“You want that?”

Smoothing his thumbs over her cheekbones, he nodded. "Of course, I do. I hate to know that this lord will rob you of all you want. He will tear down the bright soul inside you and rip it into shreds—I hate it all."

Her gaze grew wet and flickered from one eye to the other. "You truly do believe that do you?"

"With all my heart," he said earnestly.

Hugging him tightly as the words she needed to say were lumps in her throat. When she was able to speak, all she could say was, "Thank you."

He brushed a soft kiss across her forehead as he pulled away. "I want you to know that I will always love you, no matter what happens in the next few days."

Rachel reached up and held his face in warm palms. "You have my heart."

As she slipped from his grip, William had to let her go. He sat back with the portrait, staring at it with a sense of hopelessness. If he had not felt lost before, he surely felt it then. The days felt fleeting, and William felt that not days, but hours, were going to be a thin barrier between him losing Rachel.

Eventually, he stood and slipped the drawing into the folio. Then taking it with him to the house, he rested it on the table before taking out his private drawing of her. This one was filled with secret symbols, flowers that showed Rachel's true nature, one of strength and defiance. He drew until midnight and exhaustion dragged him into bed.

William woke from dreams of Rachel and sat up just as dawn was lightening the room. He did not linger in the bed long and, after washing up, headed to the servants' dining room for his morning meal, seeing as he had not eaten in more than half a day.

After that, he headed to the garden with his pencils and sat. Routinely sketching the flowers around him, he felt his mind starting to drift. It was a maid who found him and told him that he had a messenger waiting for him in the foyer.

"A messenger?" he asked askance. "For me?"

"That is what the man says, Mr. Smith," she replied.

Hurrying to pack his things up, William followed her into the house and, while holding the drawing materials under his arm, went to meet the man. The messenger was dressed in a dusty coat, trousers, and squashed hat.

"Mister Smith?" he asked.

“Aye, tis me,” he said while his curiosity deepened. “What do you have, sir?”

“I’m Richard Malloy, and I have come from your hometown in Waltham Cross, and I have some news for you,” the man said staidly.

Rachel stepped onto the empty gazebo and wondered where William was. It was not like him to be late in their sessions. She took her seat and waited patiently for him to come down the path.

Reflecting on the day before, she had no doubt that William meant every word he had said. Just as she knew that if given a chance, she would have chosen William to wed her rather than the stuff shirt, Lord Strathmore.

If only I had the power to change my fate.

She stood and went to the garden to pick a flower then carry it back to the bench, where she spotted William coming down the lane. When he stepped under the eaves, Rachel realized that he looked distracted, and his flickering smile as a greeting told her so.

“William?” she asked with her brows furrowing. “Are you well?”

“Very much, why?” he asked while pulling out the drawing from the folio.

“Because you look very displaced and preoccupied,” Rachel explained. “Did you sleep well?”

His brief shake had her sighing in sympathy. “Mayhap you should take this time to rest. I wouldn’t hold it against you.”

“Thank you for your kindness, sweetheart, but it will be best for me to get this drawing done so I can start with the oiled portrait,” William said kindly. “I have done more in worse circumstance so do not feel too sorry for me.”

His soothing expression had the uneasiness inside her chest calming, but a smoldering nugget still rested there. As William went about his drawing, she tried to keep a conversation with him, but after his stifled one-word answers, she decided to fall silent.

Something more than not sleeping was eating at William, but she did not know what, and with him not volunteering to tell her, Rachel found herself at a loss.

When he broke the sitting sometime after noon, Rachel said, “I won’t ask you to tell me what is bothering you, but I do ask you to try and get some rest. If you do choose to tell me, I am willing to listen.”

He gave her another fleeting smile, “Thank you.”

Reaching over, she lightly touched her fingertips to his face. "Try to get some rest."

With that said, she left for the house and to her rooms. Jane, who was puttering around the room, instantly saw her distressed face. "Has something happened?"

"Something is troubling William, and he will not tell me what," Rachel said. "I don't think it's as bad as when he knew that I was going to be married off and did not tell me, but it feels similar."

"Well, your parents have been gone for days now. It could not have come from them," Jane surmised. "It must be something else."

"I know, but what could it be?" she wondered.

The mystery stayed with her until just before dinner, but no matter how she tried to find a reason for William's distance, nothing came. She gave up when a messenger came to her bearing a jeweled diadem from Lord Strathmore.

If she did not fear the wrath of her parents, Rachel would have chucked the whole thing into the fire. Instead, she propped it up on her dressing table, hating how the jewels reflected her face back to her in shards.

If I marry him, I will be broken too.

Resting the jewel down, Rachel went to finish her evening routine of washing and prayers. The only thing she prayed for was for a miracle to free her from the marriage to the horrid lord.

Her sleep was fitful, and when she woke, it was with the news that her parents would be arriving home that evening. Instantly, her mood soured. The day of her engagement was looming, and soon, her marriage day.

She knew that her parents would have wanted her married off the next day, but they would hold on to the church's rule of publishing banns for three consecutive weeks—then she would be married. Even that stretch of time was no comfort to her.

Drearily she went through her morning routine and arrived at the garden's pagoda to find William there, a bit cheerier than he had been the day before. Sadly, her mood was the direct opposite.

He took one look at her and, before she sat, embraced her warmly. He did not say anything about her unhappiness, but she treasured the gesture. Going to her place, Rachel sat.

What if I run away?

Reflecting on a conversation she once had with William, she sighed. She had nowhere and none to run to. With no special skills or intimate knowledge of navigating London or anywhere else, she had to rule running away out.

If she were to leave, her only option was to go to a nunnery, and that would stop her from marrying. If marriage to the lord and taking asylum in a nunnery were her options, she would never be happy.

She kept the thoughts to herself, but from the growing concerned looks William kept flickering at her, Rachel suspected that he knew about her worry. Jane came back with a tray of drinks and a stricken face. Rachel made to ask her why but following on the maid's heels was her mother.

Lady Mary's stoic face was never comforting, and now, the tight line of her lips made it more so. Rachel reached for a glass of water to delay speaking to her mother and sipped it.

"Daughter, your father and I have come back earlier than expected," Lady Mary then greeted William. "Mister Smith, I assume you are making headway in the portrait?"

"I am," he said, not reacting to the rather brusque words. "If you would care to look?"

Lady Mary came to his side, glanced at the paper, then glanced up at Rachel where she sat. Her gaze moved between the two before she nodded. "It's almost complete."

"Yes," William said as he reached for his pencil. "And then we will go on to the painting. Of the three drawings, which of them do you prefer, Your Grace?"

“I think this one is best,” Lady Mary said, gesturing to the drawing in front of William. “It has more character than the rest.”

“I suspect that I will finish this in a day and begin the painting,” William said. “The painting is going to be a delicate process, but I am confident that it will be ready before the marriage ceremony.”

The mention of her marriage made Rachel feel sickened. Instantly, she reached for her glass of water and drank half of it.

“Good,” Lady Mary nodded curtly, then faced Rachel. “Your father and I need to speak with you when you are done here. We must go over the details of your engagement and marriage ceremony.”

Rachel rested her glass down. “Yes, Mother.”

Lady Mary leveled a narrow-eyed look at Rachel but said nothing. With a curt nod, she turned to the path and went inside the house. Sighing, Rachel said, “I am not anticipating anything in that meeting.”

“I’m sorry,” Jane commiserated.

Shaking her head wryly, Rachel sat for the rest of the sitting, dreading every passing moment. When William told her she was free to go, Rachel headed off to the house with leaden feet. She got to her father’s study and, after a steadying breath, knocked on the door.

“Come in,” he said.

Inside, she found her mother already seated and nursing a cup of tea in her hands.

“About time,” Lady Mary muttered. “It seemed as if Mr. Smith would keep you forever.”

I would prefer that more than anything you are going to force me to do.

When she sat, her mother began a long spiel about how Lord Strathmore would be around for her engagement, which would be a quiet, private affair. Her mother grouched about the three weeks it would take to publish the engagement. But it was the best option as she considered using a special license sinful.

“Those who use such a thing are mired in sin, I tell you,” Lady Mary sniffed scornfully. “They are hiding something, most likely a pregnancy.”

“Or they could be in love,” Rachel dared to interject.

“Nonsense,” her mother huffed while refreshing her cup. “Be quiet.”

Rachel wanted anything but to bite her tongue. She wouldn't dare stand and walk out, but whatever else her parents were going to say to her next was fated to go in one ear and out the other. If they were going to dismiss her, she was free to ignore them. It did not matter anyhow. Even if they tried to say something, it would be brushed

away.

She heard a few principal things, how to dress for the dinner they would be hosting Lord Strathmore, and that she should accept his proposal with enthusiasm.

Her mother rested her cup down. "Do you understand?"

"Yes, Mother," Rachel said emptyily.

Lady Mary and her father shared a look. Then, her father turned to her. "What is that tone?"

"I'm tired," Rachel infused her tone with fake tiredness. "I want to go rest."

"Oh," her father nodded. "You're excused."

Relieved, Rachel left the room, and went to her bedchambers and got on the bed facing away from the doorway. Staring blankly at the wall, she whispered. "What am I to do?"

The evening of the engagement dinner, a messenger came from Lord Strathmore, bearing a silk dress for her to wear that night. It was a

pale silk slip with a blue net overdress. It was not half as fine as what the other ladies were wearing in the ton, but at least it was a far cry from the ones she had.

Once upon a time, Rachel would have loved a gift like this, but the silk strings came with iron shackles. After marrying the Lord, her life would be one of glamor, but not one that would soothe her soul.

Her mother's face had soured upon seeing the dress, but Rachel knew Lady Mary would not stop her from wearing it as the Lord expected to see her in it.

"And wear the diadem he sent you," she said acidly while turning away.

Jane shared a look with her, just before Rachel shrugged. "I have no choice, do I?"

After donning the dress, she briefly admired the fabric, the cut and fall of the dress, and how it fit her body, but knowing that the Lord was already starting to make a claim on her had her grimacing a little.

Jane fixed her hair into a lovely fall and set the diadem on her head. "There you go. You look beautiful."

"If only I would feel that way," Rachel said. "I feel like a present, wrapped up in a pretty silken bow and topped with jewels."

She stood just in time as her mother came into the room. Rachel's brows lifted high at the sight of her mother in a dark blue gown, stately and unembellished, with a thin gold necklace around her neck. She had never seen her mother in anymore jewelry than her plain gold wedding band.

"Are you ready?" Lady Mary asked.

"Yes, Mother."

"Then come," she turned to the door. "The Lord should be here soon."

The foyer was laid with a new rug and twin blue and white Chinese porcelain vases, filled with flowers, stood sentinel at the doorway. Her father joined her and her mother at the foyer as the unmistakable crunch of a carriage's wheels was heard.

When the footman let the Lord in, Rachel found him to be impeccable; combed hair, dark suit, crisp linen and embroidered waistcoat, a cravat in a flawless waterfall, jeweled cravat pins, and cufflinks. His gaze landed on her, and a smug grin tugged his lips up.

She was assured—the night was going to be a hard one.

Chapter 19

Dropping the letter that Mr. Malloy had given him, William moved away from it and went to his table where the finished portrait of Rachel lay. He understood that the night was a big one for her, her engagement dinner with the Lord, which meant, if the Lord and Lady followed tradition, they would have banns published. That meant he had three weeks to have the portrait done.

I have had tighter deadlines.

Sitting beside the drawing was the stretch of canvas that he was tracing the image onto. He picked up the pencil, and with light strokes, added the curve of her eyes, her piquant little chin, and full lips.

He had time to get the portrait done but William did not want to waste the time he had. He drew in the elements he had on his private portrait of her, with the flowers showing her strength and defiance and even introduced a path in the background that ran into a wall.

He drew in a garden of Orange Lilies, Petunias and Dahlia's, flowers that he hoped she would understand in time. As the night ticked on, William craved a glass of milk and went to get it. He dared to go to the mouth of the hallway where the dining room expanded from and looked at the four in the room as they stood.

Rachel was stunning. Her dress was one he had never seen before, and it flattered her body with beautiful elegance. He gritted his teeth at the sight of Lord Strathmore looking smugly at Rachel as if she were a golden embellishment on his coat. He sank back into the shadows as

the family left upstairs, heading to her father's study, he believed.

He headed back up the servants' passages and up to his room, with the dour thought that he would see a saddened Rachel the next day.

Giving Lord Strathmore a thank you for pulling out her seat, Rachel sat across from her mother while Lord Strathmore sat with her father.

"So, Strathmore," her father said while handing him a cup of brandy. "I do not like beating around the bush. Do we have your proposal tonight?"

"Ah, yes," Strathmore said, settling his glass on an end table and reaching into his inner pocket to pluck out a velvet bag. "I have the ring."

Rachel's stomach flipped in nervousness, and her fingers nearly plucked at her skirts, but her mother's hard stare had her sitting motionless. He removed a ring from it, topped with crystal diamonds rimming a beautiful pink diamond stone. "Ah, here is it. A principal piece from Rundell, Bridge, and Rundell."

He stood and came to Rachel's side. "Lady Hampton, will you do me the honor of marrying me?"

No.

“Yes,” Rachel said, smiling as she extended her hand for him to slip the ring on. “I would be delighted to.”

“My pleasure,” he then sank back to his seat and pulled up a folio Rachel had not noticed he had carried in.

“Here, Your Grace, is my proposal. I think you will find it very fitting to Lady Hampton’s needs.”

At first, Rachel felt confused about why they were discussing this with her present. Was not this a private matter between the two men? At least, that was what she believed. But as her father and the Lord began debating about the sum of monies she would receive per month, Rachel felt deeply uncomfortable.

It's as if I am a fattened calf at the butcher's block, haggling over the price for my meat.

She shot a look to her mother, who appeared comfortable while the men spoke. How could she be? It was highly degrading to Rachel, but then, why would her parents care about how it looked? They were just using her for acclaim anyhow.

“We’re agreed on fifty pounds per month then,” her father said.

“Yes.”

And there it was. The price of her life was agreed on. What could be more humiliating? By the time her father and Lord Strathmore had decided on widowhood arrangements, Rachel wanted to run to the darkest corner and cover her face with her hands. It was utterly *mortifying*. How could her parents consider this right?

“So, now lastly, we have agreed on publishing three weeks’ banns before the wedding is set,” her father said. “Is this agreeable to you, Lord Strathmore?”

“I agree with that,” the Lord nodded.

“Good,” her father stood and shook his hand.

When all the humiliating matters were straightened out, Rachel held her composure long enough for her to bid the Lord goodbye. More miraculously, she gave her parents a staid goodnight and went to her room.

There, with the door barely closed behind her, she nearly ripped the diadem from her head and the ring from her finger. She felt tawdry knowing that her parents had all but stamped the Lord’s ownership over her forehead.

She dropped both items into a velvet-lined box and called for Jane. Her maid came in with a curious gaze. “My Lady?”

“I need a bath,” Rachel shivered. “I feel as if I have to wash something

off.”

Jane made to ask, but she must have seen the look on Rachel’s face then turned to the door with an agreeable nod. Disrobing, Rachel tried her best not to rip the costly dress into shreds in her haste to get it off her person. Clad in her dressing robe and with her hair pinned up, Rachel tried her best not to look at the ring.

When the bath was filled, Rachel gladly sank into the warm water, trying to scrub the slimy sensation away from her skin. When the water waxed cold, only then did she get out of the tub, dabbed the water away with her towel, and redressed in her gown.

She dressed in a plain nightgown and slipped into bed with a heavy heart. Before slipping into bed, she wished the events of the whole night away, as if they were a horrible dream.

The next morning, while Rachel waited for her morning tea and light meal to be carried up to her, she gazed out into the yard, wryly spotting the darkened sky. It might not rain, but the sky was dull and ominous. Rachel felt it fitting as the gray skies mirrored the emotion in her heart.

If only I could escape this fate.

“My Lady?”

“Hm?” She looked up at her maid holding a tray of a cup of tea and a covered plate. But what drew her attention was the tiny bunch of Baby’s Breath and Snow-dragon flowers, bound together with Ivy and she knew that it was from William.

“Your meal and Mr. Smith has sent up a gift for you,” Jane said as she settled the tray on the table.

Instead of taking the cup, she bypassed it to pick up the flowers. “What do these mean? Do you know?”

“I do,” Jane said. “The Baby’s Breath means purity of heart, the Snow-Dragon means consolation and hope, and the Ivy means endurance.”

“Oh...” Rachel felt at a loss for words while warmth began to override the emptiness inside. “Funny enough, I was getting hopeless and lost. How does he know how I feel?”

“I cannot say, My Lady,” Jane said, while her tone hinted at pride. “Mayhap he knows that you are upset about the engagement.”

“He knows that I detest it,” Rachel said while turning the simple gift around. “I wonder how he decided on this combination of flowers. Innocence and purity, consolation, hope, and endurance. Is he telling me that I should be strong and keep hoping for the best?”

“Perhaps you can ask him when you see him today?” Jane asked.

"I will," Rachel said, tenderly placing the bouquet down and reaching for her tea. "I wonder what he will tell me."

Rachel walked into a strange scene with William. Instead of having paper and his pencils out, he had canvas and thin pencils. "William?"

He looked over his shoulder, "Good morning, sweetheart."

"Same to you," she replied while nearing him. Looking over his shoulder, she asked, "Do you not need me to sit for you anymore?"

"No," he said. "The drawing is done. Her Grace chose this one out of the three, and there is no point in delaying."

Though a bit disappointed, Rachel understood what he meant and watched quietly as he drew parts of the drawing onto the canvas. "Are you wondering why I sent you those flowers?"

"I think I know a part of it," Rachel sat. "But why that particular combination?"

"I saw you last night," William said, while not moving his eyes from the canvas. "You were beautiful, undoubtedly gorgeous, but you were unhappy. I could see your grief from almost twenty feet away. You looked as if you would rather run far away than be seated with your

family there.”

His eyes flickered up to her as if asking her to agree to it, and Rachel gave him a nod. “I did want to leave, yes.”

His smile had a saddened quirk to it. “I’m sorry.”

Rachel snorted delicately. “You would be sorrier if you saw what happened later on that evening. We went to father’s study, where he and Lord Strathmore decided to haggle over the particulars of my engagement with me there. They paid me no attention as if I were a decoration on a wall. The very same thing you are creating now.”

William swiftly switched the pencil to his left hand and went off drawing as if it were nothing, but it still fascinated Rachel.

“But then, I should have expected that,” she huffed.

He dropped his pencil and sat back a little. “This may be redundant, but have you spoken to Lord Strathmore about you feel about the arrangement?”

She laughed. “I hadn’t gotten a chance to, and I doubt it would matter anyway.”

William turned away with a wince as if her words had gutted him. Again, Rachel felt touched that he cared so much for her that he felt her pain as if it were his. She reached out and touched his arm, “I

know that you care, William. You do not have to hide it from me.”

A bereft sigh left him as he picked up the pencils. “You do not have to stay with me.”

“I want to stay with you,” Rachel said emphatically but wondered why he was trying to push her away. “If you don’t mind, that is.”

“I love having you here,” William said.

As a comfortable silence descended on them, she asked the obvious question. “Why are you drawing here? If the drawing is completed, why not finish it in your room?”

“I want to get the scenery,” he mentioned while gesturing with his free hand. “The flower bushes, the paths, all of it is the ambiance I want the painting to have.”

“Oh,” Rachel said, cringing a little. “It makes sense.”

“I—”

“Daughter?” Lady Mary’s rather incensed voice cut through the conversation. “What are you doing out here?”

Standing, Rachel said, “I came for a sitting.”

Her mother's eyes skimmed over William, who was standing and bowing. In seconds, her mother saw the canvas and ascertained what was happening. "It seems to me that Mr. Smith does not need you anymore. Come back to the house. Lord Strathmore is on his way here and why are you not wearing his ring?"

"I—" She faltered a little. "I felt it too precious to be wearing when I am doing mundane things."

Her mother's lips flattened. "Nevertheless, you must wear it and come on inside. He has sent you *another* dress for a ride to Hyde Park." Her mother almost sneered at the mention of the garment.

If she is so repulsed by him buying me things, why not call off the engagement altogether? Oh right—because they need him to get to the Regent.

Stopping herself from rolling her eyes, she shot a quick look to William, then Rachel hurried to her mother's side, leaving William behind.

When she got to her rooms, she found a carriage dress of deep blue. Beneath the high waist, the front of it parted to reveal a tiered underskirt. The shade of the cloth would flatter her glossy dark hair and porcelain skin. Beside it was a spencer jacket and a fashionable leghorn hat with a wide matching blue ribbon around it.

Jane was there waiting nervously, and Lady Mary did not make it easier. "Miss Colton, get her dressed as quickly as possible. Lord

Strathmore is on his way, and I want her to look her best.” She then turned to Rachel. “And wear the ring!”

When she swept out of the room with a huff, Rachel felt her breath swoop out as well. She turned to Jane, “We should start.”

By the time Lord Strathmore arrived, Rachel was dressed, her hair in an elegant chignon fitting for the hat, and her finger adorned with his ring. Jane, who was going to be her chaperone, waited with Rachel in the drawing-room.

Lady Mary stood beside her, as the Lord entered the room, so did Rachel. Curtsying, Rachel greeted him. “Very pleased to see you, My Lord.”

Before he replied, his gaze dipped to her hand, and when he saw the ring, a smug smile took his face. “As I am, Lady Hampton.”

With a few more cordial words to the Duchess, Lord Strathmore whisked Rachel down the stairs, past the foyer, and into the waiting carriage. His driver helped Jane in, which made Rachel internally frown. Was he another one of those lords that looked down on servants?

“How was your evening?” he asked.

“Very pleasant,” Rachel said. “I must confess, I had not expected such a wonderful ring. It’s...my parents only wear basic gold bands so you see I never thought I would get something so extravagant. The stone is almost like a gooseegg.”

Strathmore laughed. “Hardly, my dear. If you want a gooseegg I can certainly oblige.”

“N-no,” Rachel laughed nervously. “That’s all right, thank you.”

“Your father mentioned the banns,” Lord Strathmore stated. “That’s fine. I can work with that, but what I want to speak with you about is the wedding day. I think St. Paul’s Cathedral should suffice. We can have the wedding breakfast at Almack’s and then retire to our home. Speaking of, I want you to have your trunks packed and sent to my home the night before so there will not be any fumbling the next morning.”

Rachel did a poor job of hiding her insecurity. She knew what happened on the night of a marriage—the consummation. “B-before we get into that, I must tell you that I have some—”

“Hesitation?”

“Concerns,” Rachel said. “About the reason why we are going to wed. I suppose this might seem silly, but I always wanted a love match for my future husband. I hardly know you enough for that to happen and we are already engaged.”

“Are you saying that love is a prerequisite for any match you would have?”

“Well, yes,” Rachel said. “I understand that emotions can unfold after people marry, but I thought I would have been given time to know the lord I would walk down the aisle with.”

He looked amused. “A love match is a rare thing in our class, dear. Half the people I know are in marriages of convenience for one reason or the other.”

“I know that,” Rachel sighed, while glancing out the window. “I thought I had a chance at beating the odds.”

“My parents married at twenty, consummated enough to conceive my sister and me, then went their separate ways,” Strathmore shrugged. “In everything but name. They still live in the same property, but mother and sister live in the dowager house while father and I live in the main.”

Rachel gasped. “That’s horrible.”

He shrugged. “Not entirely. There are no fights, they are free to do what they please, and no one raises a ruckus when the other brings their lover of the night over.”

Rachel’s mouth hung open. Soon, she shook her head, “Beg your pardon?”

“My parents have other lovers,” he said simply.

Stunned, she sat back at the horrid revelation. How could *anyone* live like that?

“I have shocked you, haven’t I?” Strathmore said unapologetically. “I hate to take the veil from your eyes, but that is how countless marriages in the ton work. They are a happy couple in public, but it is a different situation behind closed doors.”

It felt like bitter medicine to swallow. “Are you saying this might happen to us?”

He cocked his head. “No.”

Rachel did not believe him. And moreover, she felt that he had left out a few keywords. *Not if you don’t give me a reason for it.*

“So, you do not believe in love marriages then,” Rachel decided to divert to a safer part of the conversation.

“Not necessarily. I just think it might come or it might not,” Strathmore shrugged.

Turning to the window, Rachel felt another part of her hope die. “I suppose so.”

Chapter 20

It had taken him a while to mix the exact shade of blue that was Rachel's eyes; just that much black, that much white, and that much blue. Now that he had the shade down, he added it to the canvas.

A week had started from the day Rachel had found him in the garden and when her mother had pulled her away to meet Lord Strathmore. The background made of the fake path and flowers had been painted in, and he was painstakingly filling in Rachel's bust.

He did not want to rush, but there was not much time to linger either. So, he strode to keep the pace brisk but used the time to get the details right. His hand barely made a stroke as he filled in Rachel's eyes. Pausing, he added another dab before he reached for another brush and began to detail her lashes.

It was late, and though the oil in his lamp was burning low, he strode to get her eyes right before he retired. To him, Rachel's eyes spoke most to him. She might not be aware of it, but every emotion she felt was shown in her eyes. William knew when Rachel was upset, humored, or tired by the various glimmers in her eyes. Lately, all he had seen from her were wariness and dread, and he hated it.

She deserved to be happy, laugh loudly, smile, and swoon and be who she was. It was not fair for Rachel to stifle who she was to let her parents feel happy.

Pulling his hand away, William looked at the painted eyes and, for a final touch, dabbed another brush into the white pigment and added some light to her eyes. Sitting away, he sighed, then stood up and

carried his brushes to the pail on the other side of the room and rinsed them all.

After spreading the bushes out to dry under a cloth, he ensured that the canvas was fixed where it would dry before he disrobed and donned his nightclothes.

Dousing the lamp, he slipped into bed with a faint hope that he would see Rachel the next day. The most he had seen her in the past week had been glances and glimpses. He wanted to see her, speak with her, touch her, kiss her even, but that damned Lord Strathmore had monopolized her time.

Even if it is a moment alone...I would be happy.

Rain had pelted the manor house from dawn, and now it was midday. Rachel's parents were back in Manchester again, and knowing that they were alone and inside felt like a gift to William. He left the portrait to dry and went to seek out Rachel. Luckily, he came across her maid and asked her where Rachel was.

"I believe she is in the library, Mr. Smith," Miss Colton said. "She's..."

William had nearly headed off to find Rachel, but Miss Colton's words stopped him. "She's been what?"

Miss Colton nibbled her lip a little, “The best I can say is despondent. She has not told me what Lord Strathmore had done to make her so, but I can only assume he did something.”

At the insinuation, he gritted his teeth. That pompous Lord had done something to distress Rachel. “Thank you for telling me. And don’t worry, I’ll find out what happened.”

She gave him a relieved smile then headed off with a parting word. Striding to the library, William wondered how he would coax Rachel into telling him what had happened. When he entered the library, he found it—empty?

Confused, he began to meander through the shelves and got to the back of the room, and there—he sighed in relief. Rachel was asleep, perched on a window seat. The book on her hand was a precarious inch from tumbling out of her hold.

Gently leaning his hip against the wall, William plucked the book out of her lax hand then rested it away. He then reached up and brushed his fingertips across her smooth cheek. “Wake up, sweetheart.”

Instead of startling, Rachel’s lids fluttered, and he watched as her eyes slid into focus. “William?”

“You dropped asleep in the library,” he explained. “I’m not in your bedchamber.”

She pinked. “I wasn’t thinking that.”

“I just spoke to Miss Colton,” he said as he sat on the edge of the ledge. “She seemed to hint that Strathmore did something to upset you. Will you tell me what happened?”

Rachel pulled away with a sigh. “He told me something that I would have sworn he was lying about...but he was not. He told me that his parents were married but separated from the main home. And both parents take lovers when they have a care to.”

William ground his teeth hard enough that it was a surprise that his molars had not cracked. “Did he say that was your future with him?”

“Not in so many words,” Rachel whispered. “But I would not be surprised. He does not care about having a loving marriage, which I suspected, but it felt worse to hear it coming from him.”

“What a—” he bit back a foul curse not fitting for her to hear, “—nob.”

Rachel giggled at the pronounced pause in his words. “He is, isn’t he?”

“To be fair, I am also jealous of him,” William admitted while reaching out to rest a hand on her hip. “He gets to be with you when I cannot.”

“You don’t need to worry too much,” she said. “I feel nothing for him the way I do for you.”

Fire suddenly flashed through his chest while he shifted his touch to her face. His thumb slipped under her chin, and he realized that he was about to kiss her. A second later, his firm lips pressed against hers and managed to pull out a sigh of pleasure from her.

The delicate jasmine smell of her skin was intoxicating, as was the feel of her lips. The plumpness of her mouth against his and the slender softness of her body sent heat coiling through her limbs. It spread to his lower belly and further until he began to grow hard.

A soft mewl of pleasure from her and instinct guided him to kiss her harder as she did her best to keep up with him. William pulled away to let her breathe and kissed her cheek and jaw first before he reclaimed her lips. In a provocative stroke, his tongue ran across her lips before his teeth nipped lightly at her bottom lip.

Rachel sucked in a breath, and with that opening, he was kissing her deeply. As his tongue twisted and twined with hers, it aroused an urgent need inside him for something he deeply wanted but knew he could not have. And it made him kiss her deeper. Eagerly she tried to match his kisses, giving him one more lustful moan.

She scooted forward on the seat to press her body into his and reached up to touch his face. Strong desire had him sealing his mouth with hers as the kiss grew deeper. Pleasure engulfed him at a deeper touch, and the feel of her unfettered breasts on his chest almost made him feel wild and out of control.

Which pushed him to pull away. If he did not, things would get out of hand, and neither of them could handle the ramifications of that. He did not go far but stayed close enough that they could share heated breaths. He laid a kiss on her cheek and then sat back.

“You are worth so much more than what hand you’ve been given,” William whispered.

“I’m just happy he is not here today,” Rachel said plainly. “He is a proud, self-righteous, exasperating man. Sounds familiar?”

His brows lifted high. “Are you asking me to pass judgment on your parents? I could not dare. Tis not my place, but I can see what you mean.”

Rachel shifted enough that she rested her back on half of his chest and shoulder. “I’m starting to dream, William, of somewhere else. A place where I am at peace. It’s all in mist, so I have not seen where I was. All I know is that I am at peace.”

“It’s all I want for you,” he nosed at her ear. “For you to find peace and happiness wherever you end up.”

The unspoken words that they both heard were, *I wish it would be with me.*

A thick splatter of rain on the window had them facing the streaked panes for a long while. “What do you see in the rain, William?”

He quirked a brow, “What do you mean?”

“I’ve seen your drawings,” Rachel murmured. “You see women in rosebushes, and you make symbols out of rainbirds. I know you must see something more in the rain?”

“Ah,” he stroked her arm. “Rain is a symbol of hope.”

“Hope?”

“Yes,” he said. “It cannot rain forever, can it? Sometime after it pours, the sun reemerges from the clouds, and things change. Flowers grow, the grass is greener, the sky is brighter. Rain tells me that something better is on the other side of it, of the pain one might feel in a day or a year. It is going to pass.”

Rachel turned to him with bright eyes. “That was beautiful, William. I—I honestly never thought about it that way.”

He gave a slight smile. “The only problem is that the sun is taking a long while to come out from behind your clouds.”

She settled back into his side, “It will one day.”

They stayed at the window seat, looking out as the rain fell. The sound was soothing, and William knew they would have fallen asleep to it, if only Miss Colton had not come and told them that dinner was ready.

“Eat with me?” Rachel requested.

“I’ll be happy to,” he kissed her forehead. “Where?”

Taking William to her private room was a gamble that Rachel hoped would not cost her if word got back to her parents. The small table she used for her singular meals was now packed with two settings. The rain was starting to let off, but it was still falling.

Rain tells me that something better is on the other side of it, of the pain one might feel in a day or a year. It is going to pass.

She was going to hold William’s words close to her heart as they made so much sense. They were speaking about the painting when Jane came in with a letter in hand.

“Pardon, My Lady, but this just arrived.”

Rachel accepted the envelope with a quiet thanks and glanced at the now-familiar handwriting of Lord Strathmore. Instantly, she went cross.

What does he want now?

She laid the envelope aside and continued eating her dinner.

“Shouldn’t you open it?” William’s quiet question had her head snapping up.

“Yes, but not now.”

“Is it something you think will upset you?” William asked.

“Without a doubt,” Rachel reached for her wine and sat back.

Laying his fork down, William offered, “Shall I open it for you?”

Sighing, Rachel waved her permission to him, and he reached for the envelope. Her stomach began to churn with unease about what the Lord had sent her and watched as he quickly read it. William laid it down, “In essence, he wants you to attend the Barstow ball with him in a sennight, and he has made an appointment with a modiste for you to attend. He, and I quote, says, ‘I want you to be the most glistening diamond in a room of crystals’.”

Her stomach soured. “He wants to show the refined version of me off to his peers. The girl who is known to wear the frumpiest gowns in London is not the belle of the ball.”

He nudged the letter a little to the edge of the table. “Perhaps pretend to be sick that night?”

“If I am not truly sick already,” Rachel muttered. “I have to go. My parents will not allow me to say no. It’s possible that half of London already knows about my engagement to him and will expect to see me there.”

“I’m sorry,” William commiserated.

“All I can do is endure. After all, something better is on the other side of it, isn’t it?” Rachel repeated his words.

Reaching for his wine, William nodded. “Exactly.”

The modiste Lord Strathmore had engaged for her fitting was the most expensive dressmaker in the city. Madame Galilea, a tiny Italian woman with sharp black eyes and a severe bun, came into the waiting room with a clipped stride.

“Lady Hampton, I take it?” She asked. “Lord Strathmore’s intended?”

“Yes,” Rachel stood. “And my maid Miss Colton.”

“*Buono.*” The dressmaker’s eyes ran over Rachel’s body from the top of her head to her booted feet in one fell swoop, making Rachel feel as if she had been stripped of her thick gown and left bare. “I was not

aware that they made velvet gowns anymore. Well, gown is a gracious word, because what you are wearing, my dear, is akin to a tent.”

She went to a lectern and lifted a quill. “I have an inkling of what you need, but I must get some measurements.” Crooking her finger for Rachel to follow her, she turned down a corridor.

With a quick look to Jane, Rachel followed the woman and entered a small room with a divan, another lectern, enormous mirrors that adorned all four walls, and a dressmaker’s raised platform. Rachel saw herself at every angle and grimaced at how truly shapeless and unfashionable her gown was.

“Up, up,” Modiste Galilea ordered. “We shall start with the underthings. Petticoats, stockings, and such.”

Hesitantly, Rachel mounted the stand. As she stood there, images of herself flashed around the chamber, and her breath grew choppy with self-consciousness.

The dressmaker drummed her fingers on the lectern. “Please, undress.”

Rachel’s cheeks burned, “I need help with the buttons on the back.”

The modiste joined her and began to pluck the buttons out with quick efficiency, then stood back. The dress slipped off her body with ease, making the modiste’s brows raise.

“Why in heaven’s name have you been hiding such a slender body under all that fabric? *Mio Dio*. It’s big enough to clothe you and me. And are those drawers under the chemise!” The modiste sounded horrified. “No, no, those go too!”

Soon her lumpy gown, starched petticoat, and stays lay in a pile on the divan, and she was left standing in her plain chemise and stockings. Her cheeks burned a little at being undressed in front of a stranger.

Madame Galilea lifted her brows in expectancy.

“My chemise?” Rachel asked in horror. “Surely not.”

“Yes. His Lordship has requested a full suit, silken underthings as well, and if I were to measure you in that thing, I would be a foot off in my measurements.”

With a sigh, Rachel did away with the last barriers of her modesty. The modiste pursed her lips and went for a cord. Just as swiftly, the woman measured her and jotted the numbers in a book, then went to a few cupboards and took out a few things.

They fitted the corset on first, and when the ties were yanked tight, Rachel lost her breath. “Is this necessary?”

“All the fashionable ladies in London wear this garment.”

“The fashionable ladies must not like to breathe.” Pressing a hand to her stomach, Rachel muttered while the modiste went off.

Made of pale pink satin, the corset, cinching her waist, was embellished with a single column of little black bows down the front. Rachel was not sure the mirrors were showing her a true reflection for a moment. Was she that shapely?

The modiste handed her silken slips of stockings that matched the corset, and she donned them. They added a sleek empire-waisted dress of watered ivory and silver trefoils that sloped off the shoulders with puffed sleeves. The modiste pinched the middle. “It needs some taking in. But overall, it’s a wonderful look on you, My Lady.”

“May I ask, how much do these garments cost?” Rachel asked.

“All together? Four hundred pounds,” the modiste replied.

She nearly swallowed her tongue at the figure. She was sure her entire wardrobe at home had cost less than half of that sum. Rachel admired her silhouette in the mirror for a moment while trying to forget that her dress came with another price.

The modiste wrote some adjustments and then helped Rachel to disrobe and redress. She left for the first room and joined Jane.

“How did it go?”

“It went well,” Rachel said as she donned her light coat, gloves, and hat. “I was a bit scandalized, but even then, I suspect that it will be better than when I go to this ball with Lord Strathmore.”

Chapter 21

The moment she stepped into the ballroom, every eye flickered to her and stayed there. Rachel tried her best not to blush wildly at the attention given to her. The shock on their faces showed the thoughts running through their heads.

Is that Lady Hampton?

What happened to her outdated dresses?

What a transformation.

Rachel held her head up high as she and a smug Lord Strathmore made a turn around the room. The silken skirts of her dress fluttered around her silk slippers as she walked, and Rachel reached into her reticule and pulled out a silken fan, snapping it open.

On her left, Lord Strathmore whispered in her ear, "Have you seen what I see? Several gentlemen haven't been able to take their eyes off you since we have arrived. Flash them your ring a little more."

"I doubt it's my ring that is drawing their attention," Rachel muttered.

"As I had intended, you are the diamond amongst crystals," he grinned.

I do have diamonds in my hair.

While she had gotten dressed, the Lord had sent her a set of jewels to wear, including a string of diamonds to thread through her hair and a demure necklace to accent it. But the focus would be on her engagement ring.

“Am I?”

“Most certainly,” he replied.

She glanced around the room and met a few gazes, some that skittered away the moment hers met theirs and some who boldly held the look. The ball was called, and Strathmore bowed over her hand. “May I have this dance, My Lady?”

Rachel shut her fan, stuck it the reticle, and quickly handed it off to Jane before she accepted the Marquess’ arm and allowed him to lead her out onto the floor. Seconds later, the orchestra launched into the intro of a waltz.

Nervous at the thought of dancing in her new clothes, she allowed the Marquess to pull her into his arms and swing her into a graceful arc. From the corner of her eye, she saw more people stare at her from the sidelines and knew that her name was going to be the topic of the breakfast table for a while.

As they circled the floor, Rachel forced herself to relax and allowed

herself to enjoy the moment, even as nerve-wrenching as it was.

“You’re a most unusual woman, Lady Hampton,” Strathmore remarked.

“I know,” Rachel sighed. “Very, very unusual. But you know this.”

“I’m not referring to your clothes, your family, or your absence from the ton,” he said.

Cocking her head, Rachel asked, “I’m afraid I don’t understand what you are getting at, my Lord.” She frowned as she eyed him with curiosity.

“You don’t babble on most trivial of subjects like most of the other ladies do while dancing,” he said. “I once danced with a lady who went on and on about French fashion and another who listed all the cures for infantile colic.” He shuddered.

“Oh,” Rachel understood. “I am not much of a talker. I prefer to listen.”

He spun them, “Which is why you are perfect for my bride. I do not care for frivolous conversation or baseless gossip.”

“I do not care for either,” Rachel replied.

“Good,” he said proudly.

As the dance ended, Rachel did her best to smile when her heart was so very far from it. Instead, it was back at her home with William, with his easy loving smile and his warm embrace. Strathmore whisked her away to the refreshment table and dipped a flute under the champagne fountain, then placed it at her lips.

Rachel felt angered and insulted at the same time. Who did he think he was to infantilize her like this? She gently reached over and took it from him as she would not let herself be fed like a babe in front of dozens of eyes greedy for a scandal. He did not look pleased, but Rachel was not going to let herself be shamed.

“Thank you,” she said.

He had his own glass. “You’re welcome.”

Another dance was called, but Strathmore promised another to her before going off to speak with a group of lords at the sidelines of the dance floor. She went to find and sit by Jane while studiously ignoring the stares she continued to get.

“Are you all right?” Jane asked worriedly.

“No,” Rachel said. “I want to go home and feel the comfort I know is there.”

Both knew she was referring to William, and while she knew that Jane was not sure how deep their intimacy went, Rachel craved his company. His kisses and touch were dear to her heart, but even if she would never feel them again, his presence was soothing.

She flicked her fan out and sighed behind it. She had barely arrived, but the night already felt long and tiresome. If she were only half an hour in, and it felt like ten, how could she endure the rest of the next five hours?

Strathmore came back to claim another dance and spun her onto the dance floor. Even though he held her carefully, just being near him, Rachel found it hard to ignore the way her skin crawled as if a thousand worms were crawling all over her.

She managed to keep her composure through it all until supper was called. With relief, she went to the dining room with her arm looped over Strathmore's.

The dining room was wide and grand, with dark paneled walls and a three-tiered crystal chandelier that flickered the light of beeswax candles through the room. Delicate bone china and crystal glasses sat on an eyelet lace tablecloth and Rachel sat directly across from Strathmore.

A thin, silver-haired woman, Lady Barlow was nervously fiddling with the beads on her turban quivering as she nodded with rapt attention at something Strathmore said. Just as her niece sitting beside her was. Tall, handsome, and wealthy, the Marquess had fair hair, sculpted cheekbones, and a patrician demeanor that undoubtedly drew attention to him, and he soaked it up.

Rachel kept silent while he spoke, not because she didn't have much to say, but because her desire to speak was not there. Strathmore did not seem to mind that she had shrunk into the background and struck up a conversation with another lord at his side. This man had a goatee and spoke with a mocking drawl.

Whenever the man's eyes landed on Rachel, his gaze was heavy, sardonic, and judgmental as if she were an oddity more situated for a travelling menagerie instead of seated at a dinner party.

The few words he'd spoken to her were ostensibly well-mannered yet filled with disdain, making Rachel feel uneasy. Strathmore did not seem to pick up on it and went on as if all were well.

Sadly, Rachel reached for her wineglass. *Long night it is.*

With relief, Rachel boarded Strathmore's carriage as they headed home. It was nearly three in the morning, and she was almost dead on her feet. Strathmore had drunk a good five glasses of wine, and from the slurring in his speech, Rachel believed that he was intoxicated.

Jane was fast asleep on the seat behind them, and as they were travelling through London, the Marquess reached out for her. "Now that we're engaged, how about we start on the intimacy early, hm?"

What?

Fear lanced through her as she caught the wild lascivious look in his eyes, and before she could utter a word, his lips came down hard on hers. Fright ran through her, clamping her lips tight. He tried to coax her to open to him, but Rachel pressed her lips firmer.

Finally, he pulled back. "As I suspected. You don't know how to please a man. Do not worry, sweet. I will take extreme pleasure in teaching you. By the time I am done, a Cyprian will have nothing on you."

Utterly repulsed, Rachel tried to shimmy away from him and managed to shove her body in the corner, a good two feet away from him. Thankfully, Strathmore slumped dead asleep against the far window, and only then did she react. Pressing her fingers to her lips, Rachel knew she would never live with him. If it cost her life, there would be no marriage.

When the carriage came to her gate, Rachel was desperate to get out. The footman opened the door, and she nearly fell out, only to be caught by the footman.

"My Lady?" he asked in alarm. "Are you all right?"

"Yes, yes," she said. "I—must have lost my footing because I am so tired. I'm fine, thank you."

He nodded and helped Jane out as well. Thankfully, Strathmore stayed asleep, and with relief, she and Jane hurried in while the carriage drove off. She barely made it to the rooms before she blurted, "That man is a nodcock. I will not marry him."

Jane was confused. "I'm sorry?"

While yanking her coat away, Rachel said, "While you were sleeping, he tried to get me to kiss him. The nerve of him!"

"But—" Jane hesitated. "But what will you do?"

Rachel slumped to her bedside, depressed. "I...I don't know."

The dreaded night had come for the reveal of the portrait and the announcement of her marriage in the next five days. Clad in a gorgeous peacock-blue gown, embellished with delicate lace and silken ribbons, another creation of the Modiste Galilea, Rachel tried to keep a smile on her face. Though to anyone who looked closely, it was a bit brittle, and her hand was clenched around the champagne glass a bit too tightly.

With her arm looped with Strathmore's, Rachel felt as if she were a colored ornamentation on his side. People she did not know came and gave them their congratulations and best wishes, but through the polite words, she heard snide undertones of hypocrisy and jealousy.

If only you knew the truth about this arrangement and this Lord, you too would want to run to the hills.

Her mother, looking smugly pleased, called the gathering to a quiet. “Thank you all for coming and celebrating the engagement of my dear daughter, Rachel, to the upstanding Lord Strathmore. To celebrate this occasion, we have made a special memento that I believe will stand to the end of time.”

She then stepped away from the covered portrait and nodded for a footman to lift the cover away, and a hush fell over the room. The glass in Rachel’s hand nearly slipped from her grasp. She had not imagined that William had done so much.

The portrait of her was stunning. Her hair curled over a shoulder while her face was tilted up and her chin elevated. The coloring of her skin was as if he had mixed alabaster with moonbeams and painted the mystical hue in, and the blue of her eyes shone like beacons.

For a moment, Rachel wondered if she looked like that, but her concerns began to flutter away when eyes began to turn to her before flickering to the painting. Even Strathmore looked impressed, and he smiled widely. “And now we have two of you.”

“Thank you, Mr. Smith, you have done a wonderful job,” her mother praised.

Shocked that William was in the ballroom and she had not seen him, Rachel looked around to see him step beside her mother, and her mouth dropped. Instead of his usual eccentric colored and baggy clothes, William wore sterling white breeches and dark jacket and boots with an impeccably tied neck cloth.

Are those clothes even his? Why have I never seen him dressed like this

before?

Belatedly, she realized that they were clapping for William and while he bore it graciously, she knew he did not care for it. Rachel broke from Strathmore's grasp and went to her mother's side but spoke to William instead of her parent.

"Mr. Smith, I was not aware that..." she turned to the portrait while awe turned her voice into a hush, "...that you did this. It is stunning."

"From an artist's perspective, I think I have done a poor representation of you," William said self-deprecatingly.

"Well, I disagree," Rachel said. "I think you did the best-even better than I look."

"Stop doubting yourself," Lady Mary castigated her. "It's perfect. Now, Mr. Smith, shall we settle your payment this night or on the morrow?"

"I would prefer that you hold on the payment for a while, Your Grace," William said. "If you do not mind, I would like to do another portrait of her."

For once, Lady Mary looked unsure. Rachel knew her parents must have thought it was a finished deal when he'd delivered the painting, and now that he was asking for more, she felt out of sorts.

"I suppose..." Lady Mary said, hamstrung as she could not flat-out

refuse the man with so many people around them.

“And until then, all I ask is for a dance with Lady Hampton,” William asked.

Now, Rachel knew William had put her mother in a bind. She could not outright refuse him in front of the other guests. Lady Mary’s mouth thinned, but she nodded curtly. “You may.”

William bowed, “May I have this dance, My Lady?”

“Yes,” Rachel said, having eyes only for him as they moved to the dance floor.

She could feel eyes on them, but that did not matter. The only thing that did was the moment she went into his arms. As soon as she did, the room around them faded. It was a dream, and Rachel did not want the dance to end. If only she were free to be with William the way she wanted to, then all would be right.

Rachel did not know how long they danced, five minutes or an eternity, for she lost count of time. Her eyes never parted from his, and not a word slipped from her lips. Just before the end, he swung her into a speedy turn, and when she came back, their sudden closeness made her head spin a little.

As did the words he murmured into her ear, “Your loveliness takes my breath away.”

They parted, and he bowed while she curtsied. “Thank you for a wonderful dance, Mr. Smith.”

For a moment, she felt as if her tilted world had been steadied and that everything would be right. But then, her eyes landed on a scowling Lord Strathmore, and she felt lopsided again.

From that night when he had tried to kiss her, Rachel had not figured out how to tell her parents she was not going to marry the Lord, and now, she only had a few more days. She diverted to the punch table for a drink before going back to Strathmore.

When she did, she found him speaking with her parents about William. Instantly, she went on her guard, but when she heard him asking how to contract Mr. Smith again to make portraits of him and Rachel, she relaxed. Her parents explained that William was a wanderer but could be found easily enough.

“Oh, Rachel, there you are,” Strathmore smiled. “Lovely. I think we have more dancing to do.”

Tomorrow, I will try to talk with Mother tomorrow.

Chapter 22

It was done.

Rachel's portrait was finally done, and William felt the burn to complete it gone from his chest. But he had another challenge; what to do with Rachel's second portrait? One he had bargained with her parents in exchange for a dance with her last night.

Now, in the early morning, as he seated himself in the garden, he wondered what more could he do to make the second portrait even grander than the one he had just completed?

"William?" Rachel's tender voice had him turning on the bench.

She was wrapped up in her plain housecoat, and he spied a scarf tucked into the neck of the coat. "Good morning, sweetheart. How did you sleep?"

Before Rachel made to step to him, she looked anxiously over her shoulder. That mere motion had him gritting his teeth. She should not be living under constant fear of her parents, and what he hated more was that he had little power to stop it.

She came to sit by him. "Last night went well, but I must ask, did Lord Strathmore come by you at all?"

“No,” his brows lowered. “Why would he have?”

“He told my parents that he wanted to contact you for future portraits of him and me,” her tone soured. “I can hardly stand the man, but my parents will not listen to me. I am still engaged to him and soon to marry.”

“I cannot imagine how much that pains you,” William sighed.

“Almost unbearably,” she muttered.

Turning to her, William studied her face and hated the tight lines that were beginning to set themselves deeper into the corners of her mouth. If only he had the power to removed them.

His hand reached up and turned her face to him and smoothed a thumb over her cheekbone. The hesitant yet sweet caress brought a warm flush to her skin, and the surprise in her gaze had him leaning in. He knew that he was playing a risky game by kissing her out there in the open, but he threw caution to the wind. Rachel needed comfort, and he was going to give it to her.

His mouth found hers, and need shivered through her at the touch. Her lips parted to the seeking thrust of his tongue, and her jasmine scent filled his nose. Rachel moaned as she pressed herself deeper into his kiss. Her neck arching to find the best angle while she fitted herself against him.

Sliding a hand under her neck, William kissed her deeply, only holding himself away from hauling her onto his lap. The kiss was

heated, and as her lips yielded, he thrust his tongue home, over and over, and *over* again. She moaned as she did in his darkest fantasies when his tongue slid against hers.

“Rachel!” Her mother’s screech had them jumping apart.

Even with the horrific situation, William realized that it was the first time he had ever heard the Duchess speak her daughter’s name.

“What are you doing!” The Duchess was turning purple in her face. She grabbed Rachel by the arm. “Get inside now!”

Bloodless, Rachel tried, “But Mother—”

“Do not interrupt me,” the Duchess snapped. “Get inside. And you, Mr. Smith, consider your position terminated. If you dare darken my doorstep again, I will have the authorities deal with you!”

He stood, finding it odd that he did not care about the job anymore. “That’s fine, Your Grace,” he said. “Working with you has reminded me of why I despise the autocracy. You walk around with your nose high in the sky, say you are pious people, but still, you treat others like mud under your shoes. Especially your daughter who has told you that she does not want to marry Strathmore time after time. But no, you force her to do so because of your ambitions.”

The Duchess went pale and splotchy, “How dare you—”

“No,” William said forcefully. “How dare you use your own child as chattel? Is that how much you love her? To sell her off to the highest bidder when she wants to find a husband on her own time? One that she wants to love?”

Straightening her back, the Duchess hissed, “Get out of my house and be thankful that I do not have you arrested. You have five minutes to leave! And as for my sake, you will never see Rachel again or be able to twist her mind with your confounded notions of love.”

Her scorn had William scoffing. Spinning on his heel, he passed Rachel, and after bushing his fingers across hers, he entered the house and took the stairs. Thank goodness he packed light, so it did not take him long to throw his things in the sack, secure his art supplies, and take the stairs.

At the door, he glanced up to see Rachel there. As he made to open the door, a maid came running after him. “Mr. Smith, Her Grace told me to give this to you.”

She thrust a coin sack at him. He took it, shook it, and handed it back to the woman. “You can tell her that I found something more precious than money, and if she has any sense, she will see it too.”

Plopping his hat on his head, William bowed, “My regards.”

The last thing he saw as he exited the house was Rachel turning away from the landing.

That afternoon, after hours of a draining lecture from her parents, Rachel stumbled into bed and pressed her face into the pillows. She didn't even have the strength to cry. William was gone, and her parent had ordered her never to see him again. Even worse, they were still ordering her to marry Strathmore.

Bleakly she stared out at the window and felt the sunlight was mocking her. How could she feel happy anymore? Soon her very freedom would be tied to a lord she found repulsing, and the man she loved was banned from seeing her again.

Her lips tempted to twitch when she remembered how William had told her mother the harsh truth that no one ever had the courage to do before. She would always treasure him because of all the people she knew he was the only one who had touched her heart in all the right ways.

The door opened, and even without looking, Rachel knew that Jane had come in. Her maid rested a steaming cup of tea and a buttered croissant on the end table. "You did not have breakfast this morning."

"I'm not hungry," Rachel said quietly.

"Even if you aren't, it's not good to go hungry," Jane said. "That's why I brought you a simple cup of tea and a morsel, not a whole meal. Just try, please."

After a moment, Rachel sighed heavily and sat up before reaching for the cup. "They found me kissing William and dismissed him on the

spot. They did not scold me, Jane. They threatened me never to do anything like that again and that Strathmore should never hear of it. They dug into me, telling me that if I dare do anything like that again, they will lock me away in a nunnery. I almost told them that I would prefer that to whatever they are doing to me, but I could not get a word in edgewise.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jane grimaced.

Jane snorted. “You should have seen mother’s face when William told her how he despised how she was treating me.”

“He told her off?” Jane sounded gob smacked.

“Unrepentantly,” Rachel said after she took a sip. “She went purple in the face.”

Blinking in shock, Jane shook her head. “I could not imagine doing such a thing.”

Smiling tightly, Rachel drank the rest of the tea. “I will never see him again, but I won’t forget him.”

“I don’t think you should,” Jane agreed.

“They blamed him for putting these ideas in my head. How he tricked me into liking him and that he was the Devil’s spawn for taking me off the path of righteousness. As if that path is leading me into a marriage

with a man I do not like.”

“About that,” Jane asked. “What are you going to do?”

“What can I do?” Rachel asked bitterly. “They did not listen to me before, and now that they caught me with William, I am sure that they will not listen to me anymore. I am going to be married off to Strathmore, like it or not.”

“Mayhap...” Jane trailed off. “Mayhap something good will come of it?”

“If anything does, it would be a miracle,” Rachel's lips downturned.

Gazing up at the modest two-story house in the Waltham Cross countryside, William dared to walk up the cobblestone path, mounted the three flat steps, and knocked at the door.

When the messenger had come with the notice that an uncle of his had died, William had not thought much of it. He had never seen, talked with, or even known the man, so how was it that he had left him a house in his will?

The door opened to a woman with a warm smile and greying dark brown hair. She greeted him. “Mr. Smith, I suppose?”

“Yes,” William said. “And you are?”

“Missus Helen Wright, the housekeeper,” she said. “Please come in.”

Crossing the threshold, William looked around. The place was not fancy, but it was still lovely with dark wood paneling and plain wallpaper.

“Let me show you to the drawing-room and rejoin you with a cup of tea or two. There is a lot I have to tell you,” Mrs. Wright said as she mounted the stairs. “May I take your coat?”

After handing it to her so she could hang it on a hook and following her upstairs, William came to a midsized but cozy room with a scattering of wingback chairs, a coffee table, fireplace, and a few shelves stocked with books.

He turned a little in shock. It felt inconceivable that all this was his. He had never lived in a place more than a few years or even months, and to know that he had a home still had not settled into his soul.

“Your uncle, Mr. Archibald Smith, was a very learned man,” Mrs. Wright said as she put a tray with cups of tea and a kettle on the coffee table. “But he never married.”

“I—” William stopped. “I don’t understand. How is it that I never knew about him?”

Handing him a cup, Mrs. Wright said, “Mr. Smith was your father’s senior by almost fifteen years. He was your grandfather’s first son before he married your second grandmother, and by the time your father was born, your uncle was off at Oxford and studying. He travelled for many years before coming back to England and taking up a position managing the books for a local winery.”

Sipping the tea, William asked, “Why did he not reach out to me before this?”

Mrs. Wright looked sorry. “He and your father had a horrible rift, and it was never mended. I think he left you the house in apology to your father, even though he was not in the wrong, I believe.”

“What was the rift about?” William asked.

“An inheritance his grandfather gave him,” Mrs. Wright said. “The younger Mr. Smith lost all of it, but before that, the older Mr. Smith had asked him to let him manage the money for him. From then on, they did not speak.”

“Oh,” William said. “I understand now.”

Putting the cup down, William asked, “How big is the staff here?”

“Just me, the butler, my husband, a maid and a footman who manages the carriage and anything outside,” Mrs. Wright said. “Our payment comes from a fund Mr. Smith set up a long time ago, and the recurring

interest is our payment.”

“He was good with money.”

“Very good,” Mrs. Wright said. “From what I understand, your inheritance from that fund is two thousand pounds a year.”

Two thousand! My God.

A wild idea sprung to William’s mind, and he mulled it over for a moment. “Would you be able to have the master room ready in three days? I have some business to do in London, and then I will be back. I suppose we can have a sit down with your husband too so we can go over the details of the house in depth?”

“Splendid,” Mrs. Wright smiled widely. “I will have that room ready for you.”

Standing, William hugged her, “I want to know my uncle, so have a lot of stories ready for me.”

She laughed, “There might be too much for you to handle.”

“I doubt it,” William said as he headed to the staircase with one thought in mind. *Rachel, I am coming for you.*

The night before her wedding, Rachel stared at the wedding dress with sickened emptiness. In the next ten hours, she would be Mrs. Julius Bennet, Marchioness of Strathmore.

Turning back to her dressing table mirror, Rachel brushed her hair out as Jane was going to be in in a moment to set her hair in ringlets for the ceremony.

God help me if I am going to make it through?

As she placed the brush down, Jane came rushing into the room. “My Lady, I need you to get dressed right now.”

Jerking in surprise, Rachel asked, “What? What do you mean?”

But Jane was already in motion, grabbing a carpetbag and rushing to her closet. Following her, Rachel asked, “What do you mean? Why do I need to get dressed?”

“Mr. Smith is here, and he is going take you away, far away,” Jane said simply but happily. “He wants to marry you at Gretna and save you from this madness.”

For a moment, Rachel felt stuck where she stood. The idea that William was there to whisk her away from all the horrors that would soon descend on her was unbelievable.

“He’s here?” Rachel spluttered. “Truly?”

“Yes,” Jane smiled widely. “Now, get dressed.”

She shot a look to the drawer where her engagement ring lay and felt satisfied that it would stay there forever. Turning to Jane, she began to hurry, grabbing a blue carriage dress and donning it with haste before throwing a cloak over it.

She braided her hair in a thick rope and jammed a hat over her head. By the time she was done there, Jane had a bag packed with dresses and her other essentials.

Before she moved to the door, Rachel asked, “Where are my parents?”

“Asleep in their separate bedrooms. I checked,” Jane said. “We must go.”

With her heart somewhere in her throat, Rachel left the room and crept with tender steps down the servants’ staircase to one of the many doors, that led to the outside. She hurried down a dark path and, at the end of it, saw William’s cloaked form and rushed to him.

He was pulling the cloak from his head just as she flung her arms around his neck. His kiss was what she had dreamed about for days, and the familiar warmth of his body instantly gave her comfort.

“Is it true?” Rachel asked. “Are you here to take me away?”

“Yes,” William said. “It pained me to know that you were going to be a sacrificial lamb for your selfish parent, but I never knew how I could save you. But a few days ago, an uncle of mine left me some property and a house. It not as magnificent as yours but—”

“I don’t care,” Rachel said. “I would live with you in a hut. I love you, William, and being with you is all I care about.”

Wrapping an arm around her, he said, “Gretna awaits us.”

Turning to Jane, Rachel hugged her tightly with tears in her eyes. “Thank you for being on my side for so long. I know my parents will dismiss you after this but come and find me after.”

“I will,” Jane smiled widely, even while pressing a hand to her eye. “Now, go.”

With a last touch to her friend, Rachel turned to William, “Take me away, my love.”

“What has gotten you so pensive?” William asked as he fitted his chest to her back and kissed just under her ear.

After two-and-a-half days in a mail coach to get to Gretna, they had just had the ceremony and had retired to an inn a mere mile away from the border.

“I was wondering if mother and father have gotten my note yet,” Rachel said as she turned to lace her arms around his neck. “I hope they will come to see us one day, but if not...” she shrugged.

William smiled, “I understand. Supper is getting cold, and the innkeepers sent up enough to feed a village.”

“Sure,” she nodded.

As she stepped back, Rachel studied him in his simple black dressing robe. His dark hair was falling pell-mell around his collar, and his green eyes were shining like lamps from the dampness of his hair. She herself was in her dressing robe, too as they had both cleaned up after arriving at the inn from the chapel at Gretna.

A half-hour before that, inside a stone kirk—as that was what William had told her the Scots called a church—they had pledged themselves to each other over an anvil in a short but lovely ceremony.

I am now Mrs. William Isaac Smith. No title, no weights tied with silken straps, and no frustration. Just happiness.

While going to the table, she rubbed her thumb over her plain gold

wedding band while spotting a similar version on his hand. Seated, she reached for the meat pie and sunk her fork in while William poured out a goblet of mulled wine.

“You’ve been in Scotland before, correct?” Rachel asked, and at his nod, she added, “Then you can show me some places.”

“If we have time,” he said while sitting back in his chair.

He rested the goblet on the table and traced its rim with his index finger. A mundane act that suddenly and irrevocably captured her attention. In her mouth, the spiced beef morsel suddenly tasted bland, and all she could think of was...William.

The pronounced silence in the air drew William’s attention, and a sly smile crossed his face. He pushed his chair back and beckoned to her. “Come here, sweetheart.”

With warmth growing in her chest, Rachel did as he asked, and with only a thin cotton nightdress under the robe, she felt the sinew of his thighs and the ridge of his growing arousal.

She could read his intention of kissing her as it sat ripe in his gaze, but before he did, William reached up, and cupping one side of her face, smoothed a thumb over her cheekbone.

“I love you,” he said. “In my wildest dreams, I would have never expected that I would find a lady like you. One who would own my heart and my devotion. But you do. You are strong, but kind and your bold spirit makes me want to be with you forever.”

Rachel shook her head. "I am at a loss for words, William. I must say that I admire you too. I don't know all of your past, but from what you told me and how you pulled yourself out of it, I am in awe of you."

He kissed her then softly, and Rachel moaned at the pleasure and the sweet, spicy taste of mulled wine on his tongue. The kiss grew deep and sensual, and before she realized it, William stood with her in his arms. In three long steps, he gently put her on the bed.

When Rachel looked up, she saw raw passion and possession in his eyes. The air in the room seemed hot and hard to breathe, despite the open window. It grew worse when he loosened the knot on her robe and parted the lapels as if he were peeling a fruit.

When his gaze landed on her body, Rachel knew that he could see the peaks of her nipples under the thin cloth. William had not even touched her, yet she felt a warm dampness between her thighs. It brought a flush of color to her cheeks.

"I cannot tell you how long I've waited for this moment," William dipped his body to rest on his forearms and kissed her bare collarbone. "Let's not rush it."

Her very blood grew hotter, surging toward the center of her body. Lifting her hands, Rachel slid her fingers into his hair before pulling him down for a slow and sensual kiss. Then, his hands slid under her, and with a quick twist, she was atop him.

William was solid and muscular beneath her, and his broad hand spanned her waist entirely as she could feel his fingers meeting on the small of her back. As she looked down into his smoldering gaze, she felt something akin to wonder. He loved her. A man she had never expected had stolen her heart.

He tugged her dressing gown down, and by instinct, she lifted to her knees so he could pluck it out from under her. Clad only in her nightgown, Rachel canted her head when he reached up to touch her face. Closing her eyes, she turned her face into his hand, kissing his palm.

A low groan of want rumbled through his chest, and he quickly moved to unfasten his robe, worked it loose, then with another twist, it was discarded by the bedside. Now naked to the waist, William was all muscle, from the contours of his shoulders to the sculpted steel of his ribs.

It was her first time seeing a half-naked man, and Rachel shut her eyes, breathing hard. She heard him grunt a little and the rustle of clothes and realized that he had just lost his trousers. The bed dipped as he joined her.

“Shhh, love.” He took her hand and rested it on his chest. “You’ll be all right, I promise. Touch me all you want.”

Tentatively, Rachel reached out and ran a palm down his middle section and felt the springy hairs on his chest and the warmth of his skin. Dark hair covered his chest and lower made a divan down the middle of his corrugated abdomen to the vee of his pelvis, the taut hollows of his hips. And there, under her thighs, was...him.

He shivered a little as her fingers passed over him and Rachel felt comforted knowing that it was not only his touch that tugged out the same reaction from her.

“You are so beautiful,” he murmured, his fingertips caressing the curve of her covered breast, cupping the mound of it in his hand. His thumb flickered over the nipple, and her harsh breathing deepened into a moan.

William reached down and grasped her hem, “Shall I take this off you now, love?”

In a wordless reply, Rachel lifted her arms. Bare as he was, William slid his rough hands up her back and pulled her down to rest on his chest. Shifting them again, he placed a damp kiss at the hollow of her throat, then teased her with little touches of his tongue along her collarbone.

His mouth lingered along her arched neck, then slowly moved to her breast, savoring every inch of her skin. His tongue played little tight circles around her nipple, and then his teeth grazed it ever so gently. Rachel’s breath caught in her throat, turning her moan into a stifled gasp of pleasure.

Her fingers sunk into his hair, and his kisses opened a hidden well of sensuality. With a low sound of hunger, he turned his attention to her other breast, nipping and suckling.

Rachel’s lips parted as now familiar, intense feeling began deep in her belly. A curling, tightening sensation. William’s fingertips brushed across her breast, trailing a searing path over her ribs and abdomen to the crux of her legs.

When he touched her there, Rachel cried out. The memory of when he had done it at Vauxhall was ripe in her mind. William's fingers combed through soft curls, arousing her gently, then slid lower, parting her wet petals, and opening her to his touch.

While he kissed her body, his thumb found her sensitive nub and rubbed it in slow, agonizing circles. His thumb kept the same pace as his fingers teased at the entrance of her sheath.

Rachel did not know what to do; beg him to go faster or plead for him to keep the same pace as the pleasure he was giving her was intoxicating, and she craved more. His thumb slowed as he shifted down her body, and by the time Rachel realized what was happening, his lips were on her.

Then his mouth was tasting her, sucking her, driving her wild with lust. Shamelessly, she shot a hand out, gripping his hair as he gave her the wickedest of kisses. Tonguing her intimate folds and making her fingers grasp and curl on the sheets. William's tongue dragged upward in a broad lick, punching a loud cry out from Rachel.

She could not speak. She could hardly breathe or do anything more than utter a pleading moan. Rachel needed to release this tight ball in her belly, and William was the only one who could shatter it, but he was deliberately prolonging this sweet torture. He slid one thick finger inside her, withdrew it, then pushed forward again with merciless slowness, all while his tongue was still making her head spin.

"William! William, please!" she gasped, arching her hips shamelessly against him.

But his tongue kept pulling pleasure from her body as he slipped a second finger inside her, deeper this time. Rachel groaned, and her back arched, opening her body more to him.

The dual onslaught of his touches and kisses proved her undoing. His thumb grazed that sensitive bud once more, and the tumult in her belly broke, sweeping through her body with stunning force. When the last tremors finally ebbed, Rachel fell back with mind and body floating on a cloud of light.

When she peeled her eyes open, she saw him regarding her with a tender smile that filled her with warmth.

“Sweetheart...” he said tenderly while his eyes flicked over her. “You look gorgeous.”

Reaching up, she tugged him down for a kiss, then smiled through sultry eyes. “What about you?”

His brows lifted. “What about me?”

“Your pleasure,” she said while her hand drifted south. “I may be a bit naïve, but I know it cannot only be me who feels this bliss. That’s selfish, so I ask again, what about you?”

William drew a ragged breath as she hesitantly grasped his length and began to stroke him. When she rubbed her fingertips over the swollen tip, his entire body jerked in response, making her smile.

Her hand stayed on him. "There must be a way I can please you."

He kissed her chin, "There is a way we can please both of us. With your hair tumbled about your shoulders, your lips wet and swollen from my kisses, you are torn from my deepest fantasy," he kissed her ear. "Innocent yet wildly erotic. All mine for the taking."

A shock of desire flared inside her, and to Rachel's amazement, she felt no hesitancy anymore. She threaded her fingers into his hair to whisper, "Complete us."

She could feel his arousal against her thigh, his need scarcely an inch from becoming one with her own. As he reached for her legs, she instinctively canted her hips toward him.

She whimpered softly when his fingers brushed against her wetness, slipping inside her for one tantalizing second before he fitted the velvety steel of his shaft against her opening.

Wrapping a hand through her hair, he kissed her deeply while moving his hips in small, deliberate thrusts pressing forward. Her mouth fell open as the strangest thing happened. She began to expand around him as he merged them into one.

His lips covered her as, with a single thrust, he was inside, deep inside, groaning with the pleasure of being one. Rachel gasped out a little at the rip inside her, but as she breathed through it, she felt filled, stretched, and *completed*.

Her fingers sunk into his shoulder and back. He was large, burning hot and solid as steel, but all she could feel were delicious pulsations of pleasure that came from her body. She held onto William's shoulders, crying out softly as he began to move.

Little at first, but soon he found a rhythm that thrilled her even more. Sensations sparked through every nerve ending she had while William thrust into her, deeper and harder.

Caught up in a surge of desire she had never even thought existed, Rachel's gasps and cries told him of her pleasure. Her hands gripped his shoulders as her body raced to completion. On her neck, his breathing came in harsh gasps, but hers had grown just as ragged.

They danced the ancient primal waltz, driving each other higher and higher toward release. A low roar came from William as the control she had sensed that he was keeping under tight tether *snapped*. He drove into her, giving himself to her completely, creating one fluid entity.

Rachel's high cries were contrasted with his fierce, deep groans. Her body tightened, quivered, and suddenly snapped up in an arch. Her body went vice tight around his shaft, sending pure ecstasy ripping through her body. William's hips snapped hard, and his cry was guttural and harsh.

His damp breath misted across her before he laid a kiss on her skin. He slowly parted from her body and drew her into his arms after lying beside her. Rachel went limp against him, and he held her close, listening to the sweet sighs of her breathing and the thunder of his own heartbeat.

He drew her head down to his, claiming her mouth in another deep kiss. "As soon as we get back to England, we'll start our lives as husband and wife."

With happiness now a constant feeling in her heart, Rachel stepped into the inn's lower room with the intention of asking the attendant to send up a pot of fresh coffee to their room that morning when her heart froze within her. Standing there at the empty front table was her mother.

"Mother?" she blurted in disbelief.

When the lady turned, Rachel felt her knees go weak.

"You!" Lady Mary snapped heatedly. "Do you know the embarrassment we suffered because of you running off in the middle of the night! Lord Strathmore has vowed never to speak with us again!"

Rachel nearly shrunk under her mother's blistering gaze but did not. Instead, she straightened her spine and notched her head up. "So, even with all this, all you care about is your money and getting in with the Regent? You do not care about what I want. You never cared about what I wanted."

Her mother's face soured. "You are wrong. We care about you enough

to guide you in the right way—”

“No, you mean your way,” Rachel said. “If you came here to try and take me back, go home, Mother. There is no use. I am a married woman now, and you have no hold on me anymore.”

“We will get that sham marriage annulled,” Lady Mary scoffed. “Now pack your bags and come with me.”

“No.” Rachel stepped away. “You cannot touch me! Go away.”

“Rachel?” Her father came in and spotted her mother. “There you are. Get your bags. We are going home to put his madness behind us.”

Rachel stared at him. “I am not going anywhere with you two so you can use me as a pawn. I am married to William, and nothing you say will change that.”

Her father came closer. “I do not think you understand. We are taking you home from this reckless jaunt of yours.”

“I—”

“Rachel?” William’s voice came from the stairwell behind them. “What is taking—oh.”

“You!” Her father advanced against William. “You are the lawless riff-raff who seduced my daughter to use her. I will have you arrested.”

“Use me how?” Rachel shot back. “Is he here asking you for your precious money? Is he holding me hostage for it?”

“One day when we are gone, our fortune falls to you,” Lady Mary said. “It is clear to see that he is a fortune-hunter and sees you as a path to it.”

Rachel was astounded and bristled. “Lord Strathmore is more of a fortune hunter than William is, and I take umbrage to your insinuation.”

“Then why is he with you?” her mother sneered.

“Because I love her,” William said staunchly while wrapping an arm around her waist. “I know you do not believe in true romantic love, but that is how I feel about Rachel.”

“I am not convinced,” her mother snapped. “You, a homeless man-how will you give my daughter the care she deserves?”

“Not true,” William said. “I just inherited a home in Waltham Cross and two thousand pounds a year.”

“Two thousand,” her mother laughed. “One of Rachel’s dresses cost five hundred pounds.”

“It does not matter,” Rachel spoke up as she realized that nothing she could do or say would convince her parents otherwise. “I’m sorry, I tried to obey you, but I had to obey my heart first. William and I got to Gretna Green within three days by Mail Coach. The truth is I could not marry Lord Strathmore. I am happy with William. He might not be rich, but he makes me happy, and that is all I care about, even if you do not. Do not hate me for something you do not have.”

Lady Mary was furious, “That is the last straw. You’re disowned, Rachel. You have made your bed, so lie in it. Do not come to us for anything!”

The sting did not hit as hard as Rachel knew her mother wanted. “I understand.”

“You are insolent,” Lady Mary snapped.

“I am happy,” Rachel recounted.

“You will live with these choices,” her mother added.

“I will, and I’ll be happy with them,” Rachel said while leaning into William’s comforting hold. “You cannot change my mind. Goodbye Mother.”

After a shared look, her mother stalked out first, leaving her father to look at William with a few parting words. “Treat her right.”

“I promise.”

The Duke left with a curt nod, leaving Rachel to sag into William’s arms in relief. “I had not expected that.”

“Neither did I.” He kissed her temple. “Do you think Miss Colton told them?”

“Most likely, and if she did, she will be joining us at your home soon,” Rachel rubbed her eyes. “May we forget them for a while?”

“Come back to bed,” William brushed her cheek. “I will take care of you.”

She knew he meant more than that day or that night. He meant for the rest of their lives. Smiling, Rachel said, “I know you will.”

THE END

Can't get enough of Rachel and William? Then make sure to check out the

[Extended Epilogue](#) to find out...

How will the happy couple react when Rachel's parents unexpectedly visit

them after so long?

How will William feel towards Rachel's parents' repentance?

In which way will Rachel manage to reunite with her parents at last?

Click the link or enter it into your browser

<http://daphnepierce.com/rachel>

*(After reading the Extended Epilogue, turn the page to read the first chapters from “**A Seductive Lady's Guardian**”, my Amazon Best-Selling novel!)*



A
Seductive
LADY'S
Guardian

DAPHNE PIERCE

A Seductive Lady's Guardian

Introduction

After losing her beloved mother and only living relative, the fiery Lady Isabel Walford must gather her ruins and leave her old life behind. Nevertheless, fate will bring her back together with an old family friend, the enticing Duke of Hawthorn, who becomes her new guardian. Even though Isabel always thought of him as the older brother she never had, a spark of guilty desire had enchanted her heart in the past. However, when Isabel's untamed nature collides with the Duke's overbearing spirit, the irresistible feelings will return. Will Isabel manage to break down the walls of the overprotective Duke and find tantalising love in the arms of her fiery guardian?

Anthony Snowley, the seductive Duke of Hawthorn, is determined to fulfil his promise to his late mother's best friend and take care of her only child, Isabel. However, Anthony's efforts to be a proper guardian will soon prove to be in vain, as his inappropriate thoughts for her will haunt him all over again. He could never allow himself to admit his eternal love and secret desire for Isabel, but her presence now makes it impossible to disregard the forbidden attraction he feels for her. How can he suppress his feelings and choose duty over the bewitching Isabel, who has taken over not only his home but his entire life too?

As the wild-natured Isabel, is trying to fit into the alluring Duke's

disciplined life, and Anthony is prioritising responsibility over his emotions, an endless game of seduction begins. Their constant contact along with their flaming arguments are getting charged by their hidden lust, leading them to a burning and sinful affair. Yet, while they are both secretly craving for each other, a wicked woman will try to eradicate their growing romance and gain the eligible Duke's heart. Will Anthony and Isabel manage to unleash their untamed passion or will it all go hopelessly astray, leading to a shocking scandal?

Chapter 1

Hampshire, near Winchester, 1816

Miss Isabel Walford gazed desolately out of the carriage window, at the sprawling, magnificent house that had just come into her line of vision. She knew that it was set on five hundred acres and was one of the oldest estates in Hampshire.

Carlton Manor. And it was about to become her new home.

She sighed heavily, fighting back the tears. She still could not quite believe that this was happening. She had to pinch herself to know that it was indeed real. Only a month ago, she had been living her life the way that she had always done, with her mother in their small manor house merely five miles from here. She had believed that nothing could ever change. It had all happened so very quickly that her mind was spinning from it.

The imposing manor loomed ever closer. The carriage passed through the high wrought-iron gates of the property. On the top of the carriage were three large trunks, containing all her worldly possessions. Her safe, secure life at Darnley House was over forever and a new one was about to begin.

She put a fist into her mouth, choking on the tears. She must be brave. Mama had impressed that upon her. She had always said that a true lady rises to the occasion and always schooled herself in propriety. Isabel had never taken much notice and behaved exactly as she pleased. But now, all she wished in the world was to make her dear mama proud. If only she could have her back, even for one precious

day, to tell her so.

Isabel walked slowly up the grand front steps of Carlton House, towards the double doors. So many steps—at least a hundred. But eventually, she made her way to the top, walking through the huge doors into the foyer.

She stopped, gasping in dismay.

It wasn't the overwhelming opulence of the foyer that caused it. She had visited Carlton Manor many times over the years and was used to its splendour. It was the fact that almost the entire household staff were lined up on either side, standing impassively, with solemn faces and hands clasped in front of them. Maids in crisply starched aprons and frilly white caps. Footmen in the blue and red livery of the estate.

Waiting for her.

She took a deep, ragged breath. It was too much. What was she supposed to do? She hesitated, fighting the urge to run back in fright towards the carriage.

But then, someone stepped forward, walking briskly towards her. Someone that she had not yet noticed, overwhelmed as she was by this display.

Isabel breathed a sigh of relief. It was Anthony. Or to think of him properly, it was Anthony Snowley, the Duke of Hawthorn. But he had always been just Anthony to her, ever since she could remember.

“Isabel,” he said, extending his hands towards her. “Welcome. I hope you had a pleasant trip and that it was not too trying?”

She smiled hesitantly. “It is only five miles away, Anthony. I have hardly come from the other side of the country.” She paused. “But thank you.”

He nodded, looking a bit uncertain. She kept gazing at him. Anthony Snowley had always cut an impressive figure, with his imposing height, broad shoulders, and raven black hair. He was rather a dapper dresser, too. Today he was wearing a long dark green jacket over beige breeches and high shiny black boots. He was impeccably groomed, as always.

Despite her sorrow, she couldn't help remembering how she had once been infatuated with him when she had been very young. It seemed ludicrous to her now, of course. Anthony was eight years older than her and had always been like an elder, bossy brother. And he had never much concerned himself with a young girl, whose mother just happened to be the very best friend of his own. They simply ran into each other from time to time, when their mothers were visiting each other. He had always teased her, and she had infuriated him.

And now, by a stroke of misfortune, he was her legal guardian.

“Of course,” he said, clearing his throat. “I rather meant that I hoped it was not too trying emotionally, Isabel. It is not every day that you pack up and leave the only home you have ever known to move

somewhere else entirely. How are you feeling?"

She took a deep breath. "I am rather in need of refreshment, Anthony." Her eyes drifted towards the line of servants. "Perhaps we might get this over and done with? I was not expecting such a formal welcome to your home."

He nodded hastily. "Of course. It seemed the proper thing to do, now that you shall be in permanent residence at Carlton Manor. Let me introduce you to the staff and then we can retire to the parlour for some tea." He paused. "I have someone else I want you to meet, waiting there for us."

She nodded, mystified. Who was he referring to?

But before she could question him, he whisked her away, towards the line of servants, making the introductions. Isabel fixed a smile onto her face, nodding politely. She didn't think she would remember the name of a single one.

When the introductions to the staff were blessedly over, she followed him to the parlour, on the second floor. They walked past many splendid rooms, each one more impressive than the last. She still could not believe that this was about to become her new home. It was so large and somehow impersonal, despite its grandeur.

Her heart seized with longing for her own sweet home. The warm, cosy parlour, where she and Mama would do their embroidery of an

evening, side by side. Occasionally talking, but usually just sitting in comfortable silence.

Stop it, Isabel, she told herself fiercely. Those days are gone now. This is your new home and your new life.

They finally reached the parlour. Another truly impressive room, with pale green walls and an ornate ceiling. At least she was familiar with this particular room. She and Mama had often sat in here over the years, visiting the late dowager, Anthony's mother. Her mother and the dowager had gossiped and giggled like girls over tea and cream cakes. But then, they had been friends since childhood, as dear to each other as sisters.

The silver tea service was already laid out, along with a selection of sweets, piled high atop a three-tiered rose-patterned cake stand. And sitting in front of it, reading a small orange covered prayer book, was a middle-aged lady with brown hair that was threaded through with a few grey strands. She quickly stood up, lowering the book and gazing at them expectantly.

Anthony cleared his throat. "Isabel, may I introduce my Aunt Hester?" He paused. "You may call her Lady Snowley."

The lady inclined her head. "I am very pleased to make your acquaintance, Miss Walford."

Isabel smiled uncertainly.

They sat down. Anthony himself poured the tea, passing out the cups.

Isabel studied the prim unsmiling lady over the rim of her delicate cup.

Anthony's Aunt Hester was as thin and brittle as a twig, in a severe navy-blue muslin gown, with long sleeves and a high neckline. Her face was long and angular, with a thin aquiline nose, and cold steel-blue eyes. For all the world she reminded Isabel of one of her late father's greyhounds.

Anthony cleared his throat. "Isabel, Aunt Hester has just moved into the manor, as well. She has left her home in Basingstoke, to act as a chaperone for you, while you are in residence at Carlton Manor."

"Chaperone?" Isabel gazed at the lady nervously. "Why do I need a chaperone?"

The lady snorted. "Oh, come now, Miss Walford. It would not be appropriate at all for you to live in the manor with only His Grace." She pursed her lips. "A young lady must be supervised at all times, for her own protection."

Isabel glanced at Anthony. He refused to look back at her.

"It is quite the done thing, Isabel," he said quickly, placing down his teacup. "There is no one else in residence here and you do require a lady's companion. I am only grateful that my Aunt Hester was available to come and take the position at such short notice."

The lady inclined her head imperiously. "I am always content to do a good service, Your Grace."

Isabel stared at her in utter dismay. Of course, they were both right—she wondered now why she had not thought this might be a possibility. She supposed it was because it was just Anthony. The fact that he was a gentleman of nine and twenty and she a young lady of one and twenty meant that she must have a companion at all times.

But she didn't like this lady. Not one little bit. She didn't know why she had taken such an instant dislike to her, but there it was. The thought of this prim, humourless lady constantly shadowing her was almost more than she could bear.

"Aunt Hester shall make sure your day is well structured as well, Isabel," continued Anthony, frowning slightly. "I am often very busy with the affairs of the estate, you see. Your dear late mother would wish it this way. I promised her before her passing that I would give you the very best of opportunities, as your guardian."

Isabel's eyes filled with tears again. "I see. And what exactly do you mean by opportunities, Anthony?"

He smiled. "We shall discuss that tomorrow after you have rested, my dear. I can see that you are a little overwhelmed." He glanced at her with anxious eyes.

Suddenly, she placed down her teacup, standing up. "I am a bit overwhelmed, even though it was a short journey. May I be shown to my chambers?"

"Of course," said Anthony hastily, standing up. He rang the bell on the

side table. The butler appeared within a minute. "Show Miss Walford to her chambers, Hardy. And make sure that her maid is there to attend to her."

"Very good, Your Grace," said the butler.

Anthony turned to her, his eyes softening. "Rest now, Isabel. It has all been a whirlwind. Believe me, I do understand how hard it all is for you."

She nodded. Awkwardly, he leaned forward, giving her a quick embrace.

She bid farewell to the still unsmiling Lady Snowley, who was gazing at her as if she was a strange specimen that she could not quite work out. And then she left the room, following the butler up the staircase, to the third floor of the house.

Her new chambers. A large rose-coloured room with a canopied mahogany four-poster bed in the centre. High windows, allowing the late afternoon sunshine to stream in.

The maid entered, bobbing a curtsy.

"Lucy, is it not?" asked Isabel, frowning.

"Yes, miss." The girl was fair and chubby. "Do you need anything?"

Isabel shook her head wearily. “No. Just wake me before dinner to dress. That is all.”

The girl curtsied again, before exiting. Isabel was finally alone.

She collapsed onto the unfamiliar bed, stretching out, not even bothering to take off her slippers. The tears that she had been trying so desperately to keep at bay spilt out of her, at long last.

She was utterly alone in the world. An orphan, long without a father, and now without a mother, as well. She had no other family. Adrift in someone else’s home with a sour-faced lady as her companion. Her life as she had known it was gone forever.

She sobbed into the pillow. At least she knew Anthony. Her new guardian was not a stranger to her. She supposed she must be grateful for that small mercy.

But as the tears kept flowing, unchecked, she could not feel that gratitude at all. She wanted her home. She wanted her mother. She wanted everything to go back to just how it had always been.

Chapter 2

Anthony Snowley, the current Duke of Hawthorn, walked to the cabinet in the corner of his study, surveying the contents with a weary eye. Usually, he would have a port or two if he retired here after dinner, but tonight he felt he needed something with a bit more kick. He reached for the bottle of fine Scottish whiskey at the back, pouring himself a double shot.

He sat down in the armchair near the fire, putting his feet up, watching the flames flickering in the hearth. He had always known that today was going to be trying, but even he couldn't have suspected just how difficult it had been.

Contemplatively, he sipped his whiskey. He now had not one, but two, people living with him in his home—apart from the multitude of servants, of course. It had only been himself, rattling around this enormous estate for the past two years, since his mother had passed away. His late father had died a year before that, passing the duchy and all its attendant duties onto him. He had become used to being by himself.

He smiled ruefully into his whiskey. He was alone no more. He was now the legal guardian of a young lady, even though he was only just short of thirty. He always pictured guardians to be middle aged or older gentlemen, usually with large families of their own, benevolent and wise, and probably rotund. Not nine and twenty and still unmarried, like himself.

He sipped the whiskey. Ah well, that was life, he guessed. It sometimes threw up the most unexpected hurly-burly. This time it was in the shape of a beautiful and spirited young lady named Miss Isabel Walford, the daughter of his late mother's dearest friend.

He sighed, thinking about Isabel. He had known her forever. He almost couldn't remember a time she hadn't been in his life, because of their mothers' close friendship. An impish, mischievous girl, given to teasing him unmercifully. He had always thought of her as the little sister he had never had.

Until, quite suddenly, he had stopped thinking of her in that way entirely.

He downed the whiskey, getting up to pour himself another. It had gradually started happening a year ago, he supposed. He would find himself lost in admiration, gazing at her, like a lovesick puppy. He had always known she was beautiful, of course, with her straight as silk strawberry blonde hair, her luminous brown eyes and wide, dazzling smile. But he had never really felt it before. But then, she was a woman, now. A simply gorgeous young lady of one and twenty, with the world seemingly at her feet.

He sat back down, sipping his second drink. He simply must stop thinking about her in that way, of course. It had probably never been wise, but now, it was unthinkable. Despite the fact there was only eight years difference in age between them, he was now her legal guardian. A role he had promised her dying mother he would take on and which he took very seriously, indeed.

He thought back to that poignant last meeting with Mrs Walford, in her home. She had insisted upon being seated, with a rug up over her knees, even though he knew from the minute he walked into the parlour at Darnley House that she should be abed and would probably be ensconced there if not for his visit. She had been wan and ashen and so very thin that his heart had lurched with pity.

“Anthony,” she said, in a thin wispy voice. “I am so very glad you found the time to visit me, my dear.”

He took her hand. It was like holding a bag of bones. “Of course, dear aunt.” He had always called her aunt despite the fact they were not related. “I am at your service.”

She smiled wanly. “You have always been a dear boy, Anthony. A credit to your dear mother, God rest her soul.” A shadow fell over her face. “I do miss her so. But I know she is smiling down at you, so very proud of the man you have become.”

“Thank you, aunt.” He took a deep breath. “What did you wish to say to me?” He could see she was already tiring rapidly.

She blinked. “Yes. Of course. The reason I summoned you here.” She was overcome by a fit of coughing for a moment. “Anthony, please promise me, you will look after my girl...once I am gone.” A deep, ragged breath. “She will have no one else in the world. We have no other family who can take her in. She will be destitute...”

“Hush, aunt.” He frowned. “You do not need to even ask it, although I am glad that you did. Of course, I shall care for Isabel. She is like a younger sister to me.” Not quite anymore, he thought guiltily. Quickly, he brushed that thought aside. “You do not need to worry about such a thing. Just worry about your own health and making a full recovery.”

She had laughed mirthlessly. “My boy, there shall be no recovery for me,” she whispered. “Even now, the angels sometimes visit me. I can see them standing in the corner, watching.” She shuddered. “They are

waiting. As is my dearly beloved husband. Waiting to take me to my final home.”

He gazed at her with sad eyes but did not contradict her. It was obvious to him now that she was indeed going to die. It was no longer a question of if, but when.

She had started to become more frail only two months prior, complaining of constant stomach pains. It had slowly overtaken the robust woman he had known. She had wasted away to almost nothing. He had sent his own physician to tend her, but the man had told him there was nothing more to be done. Mrs Walford was suffering from a tumour in her stomach. Now, she existed in a half-stupor of laudanum. He was surprised to find her as bright as she was this morning; on his previous visits she had been less lucid.

“Where is Isabel now?” he asked gently.

Mrs Walford smiled slowly. “I told her to go into town to look at bonnets with her dear friend Sarah Bowles. She has barely left my side in weeks, Anthony, and she needed a break.” She paused. “She is still so young, and you know what a headstrong girl she is. Just turned one and twenty. I fear for her future once I am gone.”

“Do not fear for it, aunt,” he said fiercely. “I vow to you I shall look after her. I shall have the papers drawn up this afternoon, to become her legal guardian, if that is what you wish.”

“Yes, that is what I wish,” she whispered, her eyes moist with tears. “You are a good man, Anthony. You have become a responsible duke. A credit to your parents. I know my Isabel shall be in good hands with you.” She paused, taking another deep, ragged breath. “Can you

continue her education? She has started to learn French, as her dear father wanted, and philosophy, but alas, since he passed, we have not had the funds to continue it.”

Anthony had smiled. The late Mr Walford had been an exceptional, free-thinking gentleman in many ways. He had believed in a thorough education for young ladies as well as gentlemen. Anthony remembered how passionate he had been about educating Isabel above and beyond the normal accomplishments of a young lady. Perhaps part of it had been the fact that Isabel was his only child and he had never had the son he desired. But it wasn't all about that, either.

“I shall commit to her education, aunt,” he said slowly. “I shall honour you and your late husband’s wishes. I shall hire the best tutors for her. You do not need to fear for her future, I do assure you.”

“Thank you, Anthony.” A single tear had squeezed from her eye. “I can go to the angels with not quite so much fear, knowing that my girl is going to be well cared for.”

She had passed away barely two weeks later.

Anthony downed the second whiskey, feeling quite emotional, as he remembered Mrs Walford and her fervent desire to protect her only child beyond the grave. He had given her a vow and he intended to keep it. It had only been a month since her passing, but the wheels had been set in motion immediately. He had only allowed Isabel to linger at her parental home out of kindness for her loss. Darnley House was already sold, and the money put in trust for Isabel’s dowry. Her future was assured.

And in that month, he had set about securing other things, for her arrival at Carlton Manor. He had hired tutors in a variety of wide-ranging subjects, to give her the liberal education her parents had desired. French, philosophy, even mathematics, alongside the more traditional drawing, music, and dancing. It would be a full schedule, but he was confident she would master it. Isabel was a very bright girl, if somewhat precocious.

He had also realised that she would require a lady's companion. A young lady of one and twenty could not reside with him unchaperoned. After much thought, he had asked his Aunt Hester, who was his uncle's widow. He did not know her very well—his father had been estranged from his brother for years—but he could not think of anyone else even remotely suitable. He did not know the lady well, but she was middle aged, very proper, and a pillar of her local community in Winchester. To his mind, a perfect lady's companion.

To his surprise and gratitude, Aunt Hester had agreed immediately. For a very generous stipend, of course. She had rented out her own house but could always return to it when needed. Isabel would marry eventually and then she would no longer be required. He tried to put aside the misgivings he felt at that thought.

Of course, Isabel would marry. She was beautiful and accomplished. Under his wing, she would become even more accomplished. He had made sure she had a dowry. Now, all she had to do was secure a husband and her future was assured.

For a moment, he remembered how he had awkwardly hugged her that afternoon, before she had retired to her new chambers. The scent of her rose perfume. The feel of his arms around her...

Stop it, he told himself fiercely. She is your ward. It is not appropriate at all.

This silly infatuation he had developed for her had to stop. Now.

Suddenly irritable, he got up, placing the empty glass on the cabinet. Time for bed. It was already past midnight and there was a lot planned for tomorrow. Most of Isabel's new tutors would be arriving at various times to meet her.

He frowned, recalling her low spirits today. It was so unlike her—she was usually so playful and gregarious. He wished he knew how he could help her, but grief was a slow process. And she had not only lost her mother but the only home she had ever known. He must be patient with her.

Keeping her busy would be just the thing, he thought. It would distract her, occupy her mind so that she could not brood too much. Yes, that was exactly what Isabel needed. Reassured in his own plan, he finally retired for the evening.

Passing her bedchamber, he stopped for an instant. Was that a muffled sob he could hear inside? For a moment, he hesitated, his hand at the doorknob, before collecting himself and hastily continuing on.

His face burned. It wouldn't be appropriate to enter a young lady's chambers in the middle of the night. Even if it was only to give her some much-needed comfort. He was her guardian now. Not her friend. Certainly not anything else. He must always remember that.

Chapter 3

Early the next morning, Anthony was just on his way towards the breakfast room when he heard the commotion outside. An excited cacophony of barking, so loud that it was almost deafening.

He frowned. What the deuce? It was obviously his dogs. But they were supposed to still be safely in their kennels. What were they doing out, running about the estate, at this time of day?

Muttering to himself, he strode out of the house, towards the grounds. If the dogs had escaped the kennels, he would have a strong word to say to the keeper, indeed. It was the man's job to tend to the hounds, after all. Not let them run about causing mischief. They could be rambunctious if left untended, chasing the hens in the estate's poultry-yard, or ripping linen off the laundry lines.

He saw Lucy, the maid he had decided would best suit to attend Isabel as a lady's maid, standing at the top of the gardens, staring down below. Her hands were on her hips.

He approached her swiftly. She heard his approach, turning around, dropping a quick curtsy. "Your Grace."

"Lucy," he said curtly, nodding to the maid. "What is that infernal racket? Why are the dogs out so early, running through the grounds?"

The maid smiled slowly, pointing. "See for yourself, Your Grace. It seems the young lady decided to get up early and make herself quite

at home.” She sobered suddenly. “Before I could attend her this morning and dress her, it seems. I am very sorry.”

He gazed in the direction the maid was pointing. His mouth fell open, at the sight in front of him.

Isabel was running around the lawn, still dressed in her white nightdress, with a woollen shawl loosely wrapped around her shoulders. Her strawberry blonde hair was flowing freely, falling like a curtain around her. The five dogs were all barking excitedly, weaving in and out of her legs, as she played with them.

His loins tightened involuntarily at the sight. It wasn't just that her eyes were sparkling with excitement. It was the fact that she was barely dressed, in her nightgown, her silky hair still rumpled by slumber. He saw the pale flash of the white skin of her legs as she ducked and wove around the dogs.

Suddenly, she straightened, seeing him in the distance, watching her display. To his shock, she started waving madly, beckoning for him to join her.

Stiffly, he marched over to her. “Down,” he admonished the dogs, in his sternest voice. They immediately cowered, watching him, their tails wagging furiously. “Stay.”

“Why are you chastising them?” Isabel asked, looking surprised. “We are having a jolly old time of it. They are having a ball and so am I. Why do you not play with us, as well?”

“Isabel,” he said firmly, trying to avoid looking straight at her. “The dogs need to be taken back to the kennels. It is rather too early for them to be running around the grounds in such a manner.” He paused. “And rather too early for you to be, as well. You are not properly dressed.”

“So?” she challenged, tossing that silky skein of hair over one shoulder. “I would often run around with the dogs at home, before breaking my fast. Mama and Papa would laugh at me.” She gazed at him. “You did tell me to try to feel at home here, Anthony.”

He sighed irritably. Was she being deliberately obtuse? How could she not realise that it was completely inappropriate for a young lady to be running barefoot across the grounds dressed only in her nightgown? He was surprised to hear that her parents had tolerated such behaviour in their own home. But then, Isabel had always been a wilful and high-spirited girl. Perhaps they had just decided to pick their battles with her wisely.

“Come and play,” she implored again, smiling at him, in the most bewitching of ways.

“Go and get dressed, Isabel,” he said abruptly, turning away. “I shall send someone to bring the dogs back to the kennel. We shall talk when we break our fast. I shall wait for you in the breakfast room.”

“Spoilsport,” she called after him.

He turned around, looking at her. To his amazement, she stuck out a perfectly pink tongue at him, pouting.

He kept walking, so eager to get away from her innocently alluring form that it was like a compulsion. This must not happen again. It seemed that he must start disciplining her immediately. The onerous duties of being her guardian were starting rather sooner than he had anticipated.

His heart lurched a bit when she finally entered the dining room half an hour later. She was perfectly dressed and coiffed, wearing an ivory white morning gown, her wild hair from earlier had been restrained into a neat chignon twisted on the back of her neck. She took a seat near him at the long table, smiling at him brightly.

He let her choose her food and watched as her puzzled gaze lingered for a moment on Aunt Hester, who had decided quite strangely to disassociate from him, sitting at the other end of the long table, doggedly nibbling on a piece of seed cake. His aunt had barely uttered a word to him, simply tersely nodding in greeting, when she had entered the room, taking her secluded position.

Isabel shrugged, picking up her teacup and sipping noisily. He knew that she was only doing it to irritate him. She usually had impeccable manners.

“Honestly, Isabel,” he said, frowning. “Must you?”

Her smile widened. “I really must,” she said, laughing, as she put down her cup. “Why were you such an awful killjoy with the dogs this morning, Anthony? I was only having a bit of fun, after all.”

"I have already told you," he said, buttering a piece of toast. "It was not the time to be doing so. And you were not properly attired." He glared at her. "Anyone could have witnessed you. There are many men in my employ, Isabel. Did the keeper see you when you got the dogs from the kennels?"

She shook her head, seemingly unfazed. "He was not there. And if anyone was looking at me...well, they should know better. It was all perfectly innocent." She drew a deep breath. "My nightgown is more modest than many of my gowns, Anthony. It has rather longer sleeves and a very high neckline."

He kept glaring at her, shaking his head. He was at a loss how to explain it to her. It wasn't the lack of modesty with the nightgown that was the issue. It was the fact that it suggested she had just risen from her bed, with her hair still loose, and barefoot. But it seemed that Isabel had just decided to be contrary this morning.

Watching her sparkling brown eyes, his gaze softened. Yes, she was infuriating, but she was at least seemingly back to her old spirits. He truly shouldn't discourage it, especially since she had been so melancholy the day before. She had been through such a hard time and none of this was easy for her.

She picked up her teacup again, playfully staring at him over the rim. "What on earth are you eating? Liver and bacon?" Her nose wrinkled delicately. "You are turning into an old man, Anthony. I fear you shall be complaining of gout soon enough."

He laughed. "A hearty breakfast, Isabel. You should try some liver yourself. You are rather too pale."

She grimaced. “No, thank you! My fruit and seed cake are quite sufficient for me.” Her eyes sparkled. “But if you feel as if you need to consume half of your body weight in fatty flesh and offal to prepare for the day ahead, do not let me dissuade you, sir.”

He laughed again. “So, I shall, then. Now that I have your permission, of course.”

She sighed dramatically. “Can I invite my dear friend Sarah Bowles and her companion here, Anthony? To Carlton Manor?”

He nodded, amazed that she felt the need to ask. “Of course, you may, Isabel. Carlton Manor is your home, now. Feel free to invite any of your friends to visit you here.”

She smiled. “Thank you. I have a feeling I may feel a trifle lonely here.” Her eyes slid sideways towards Lady Snowley, who was still primly nibbling her breakfast, not even looking at them. She lowered her voice. “She is rather unfriendly, is she not?”

Anthony’s mouth twitched, trying not to look at his aunt. He leaned over the table towards Isabel, lowering his voice, as well.

“Perhaps she is not very good in the mornings,” he whispered. “Give her a chance, Isabel. It is early days yet, and she is still settling into Carlton Manor, as much as you are.”

Isabel rolled her eyes. “I do not think it much to talk over breaking

one's fast, instead of squirrelling oneself away at the far end of the table. She is odd, to be sure."

Anthony straightened, picking up his knife and fork. Privately, he agreed wholeheartedly with Isabel's assessment. His aunt was rather odd. He had never been close to her; they were practically strangers. He had just assumed that because she was so prim and pious that she would make a perfect lady's companion. He hadn't expected these quirks of character, at all.

"We should discuss your education," he said, changing the subject. "After breakfast is over, I have arranged for your tutors to come and meet you."

She stared at him, seemingly gobsmacked. "Tutors? Pray tell, how many tutors shall I have and in what subjects?"

"There shall be quite a few," he smiled. "In keeping with your late mother's dearest wishes for you, Isabel. Dancing, music and drawing, of course. And I have also arranged a French tutor, a mathematics one, philosophy..."

"Dear Lord, Anthony," she interjected, her eyes sharp. "You shall have me stitched up from morning until night! French?" She looked doubtful. "I started to learn it years ago and was never good at it. Mathematics? Why do I need to know anything about such a subject?"

He sighed heavily. "Because, as I said, it was your late mother's dearest wish. As it was your late father's as well. I am only honouring their wishes, Isabel." He paused. "It is important that you occupy your time wisely. I am normally very busy all day and shall be in my study or attending to duties around the estate, but I am always available if

you need me, of course. Aunt Hester shall oversee it all.”

She was moving restlessly. He could feel rather than see her knees bouncing beneath the table. She didn't look pleased by this information at all.

“How about we go for a ride around the estate this afternoon?” he asked impulsively. “After the tutors have left. Work off some of that energy of yours.”

Her eyes gleamed. “Could we? I would like that very much indeed.”

“It is done,” he said, throwing his napkin onto the table. He gazed at her. “I am just so very glad to see a return of your spirits, Isabel. You almost seem like your old self once more.”

She smiled at him. A wide, beautiful smile, entirely guileless. A smile that seemed to arrest him with its dazzling beauty.

His breath caught in his throat. He would give anything to keep that smile upon her face. She had been through enough and she deserved some happiness. Some small slivers of joy amid all of her recent sorrow.

He was resolved. He would become the very best guardian he could for her. He just needed to dampen down these strange impulses he had about her. It would take time, but it was surely not impossible.

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